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# ***A Lot of Leaders?***

Robert Parris Moses, SNCC, and Leadership  
in the Production of Social Change during the  
American Civil Rights Movement, 1960-1965

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## **Promotiecommissie**

### **Promotor**

Prof. Dr. A. Fairclough (*Universiteit Leiden*)

### **Overige leden**

Prof. Dr. W. Chafe (*Duke University*)

Prof. Dr. C.A. van Minnen (*Roosevelt Study Center*)

Dr. M. Roza (*Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen*)

Dr. E.F. van de Bilt (*Universiteit Leiden*)

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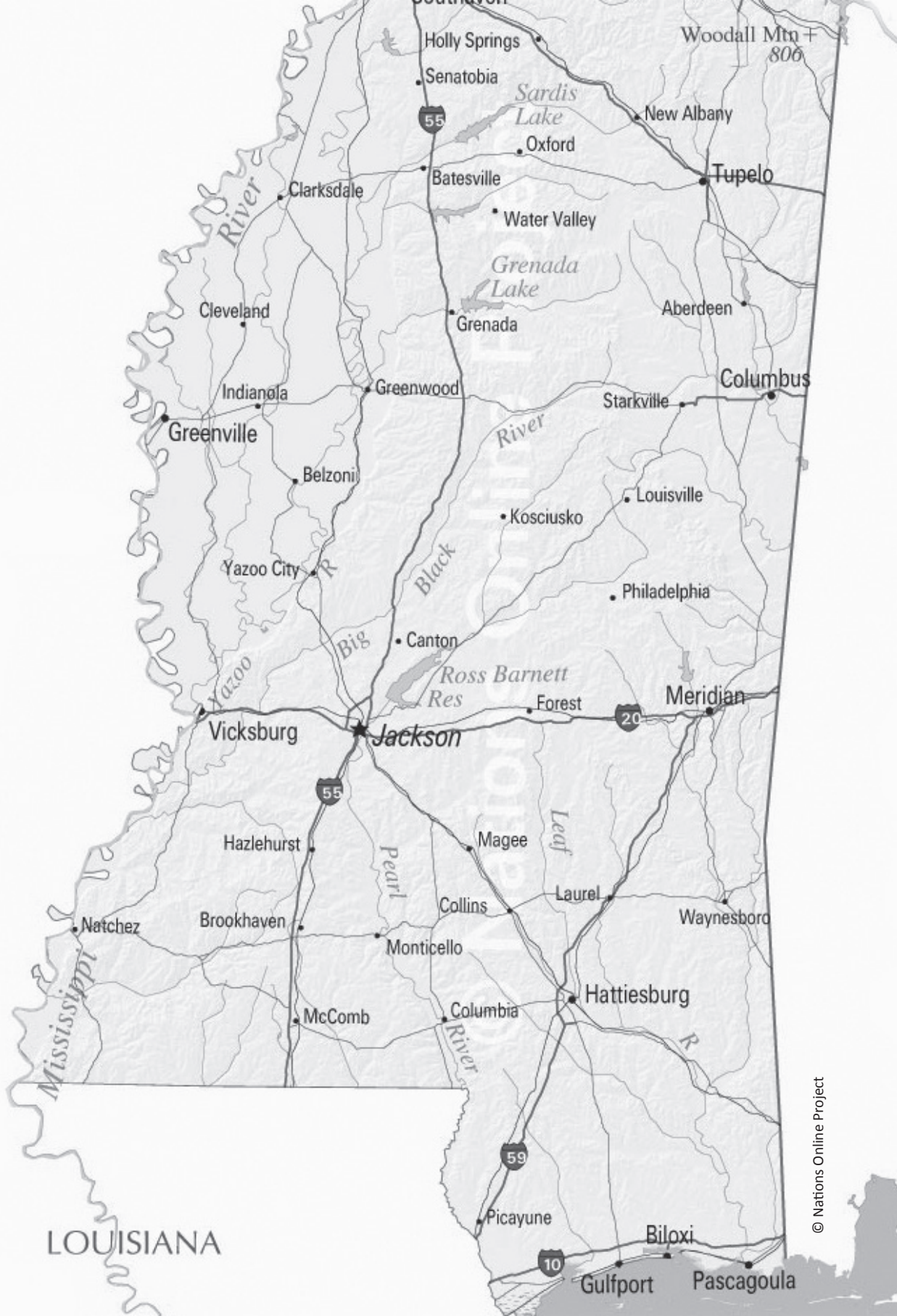
*Laura Visser-Maessen  
Nijmegen, the Netherlands, 12 February 2013*

This Band of Brothers was led by Bob Moses  
Who was fought by all of the official forces  
He was silent in manner  
But his strength and determination  
were like a waving banner  
In his work he was persistent  
And met his opposition with  
nonviolent resistance.

*Dorie Ladner, December 22, 1964*







# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. The Wave or the Ocean?

“I never thought about the [civil rights] movement in terms of King. It never occurred to me to think about the movement in terms of King. I lived and breathed the *movement*.” African-American social activist Robert Parris Moses of the civil rights organization SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) spoke these confrontational words at a 1986 symposium celebrating Martin Luther King, Jr. To stress his point, he used the following metaphor: “Consider that the movement is an ocean of consciousness, protest, rebellion, organizing...The movement was this ocean and we were out there; we were the waves on the ocean. Let us shift our attention from the wave to the ocean, because the wave is not the ocean. Even if it’s a tidal wave [like King], it has no meaning apart from that ocean.” “Likening the movement to an ocean,” historian Nathan Irvin Huggins later commented, “implies that it has a constant flood and direction, which frees us from the endless wait for the individual leader” for salvation. In this bottom-up view, countless ordinary people could thus justifiably be marked as the true instigators of social change. They were, in Moses’ analogy, the ocean that made waves like King possible.<sup>1</sup>

Considering Moses’ movement history, his plea to explain the origins of the movement through the collective endeavor of numerous, faceless people was not surprising. He exemplified an approach for social change that historian Charles Payne called the “community organizing tradition.” This complemented the media-centered “community-mobilizing tradition” associated with Martin Luther King, which “focused on large-scale, relatively short-term public events,” like marches or other direct action protests. While both methods made sizeable contributions to the movement, only the first stressed local empowerment and individual agency on a long term basis. In this approach, the role of civil rights organizers was to develop local initiatives and local leadership, not to take all important decisions on behalf of local people. As Moses put it in 1965: “Most political movements depend on a few people who work very hard; we want maximum participation of the people. King doesn’t put people in motion. He has separate campaigns.”<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless Moses was seen as a significant wave himself—much to his own dismay. Historian Taylor Branch contended that “[i]n Mississippi, Bob Moses was the equivalent of Martin Luther King.” SNCC-workers and locals alike revered him. One worker thought him to be “Jesus Christ in the flesh”; another believed that “if there would have been no Bob Moses there would have been nothing.” Huggins insists that “individuals do make a difference,” and that “it is foolish to imagine that the individual actors were interchangeable parts and that, without [their] particular personality...someone else would have served as well.” Moreover, he warned, “there is as much danger in romanticizing movements as in romanticizing individual leaders.”<sup>3</sup>

The goal of this dissertation therefore is to bridge Moses’ and Huggins’ views on how social change for African-Americans was generated during 1960-1965 by analyzing the interaction *between* the

<sup>1</sup> Robert Parris Moses, “Commentary,” in *We Shall Overcome: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Black Freedom Struggle*, eds. Peter J. Albert and Robert Hoffman (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993), 72-73, 75-76; Nathan Irving Huggins, “Martin Luther King, Jr.: Charisma and Leadership,” *Journal of American History* 74, no. 2 (September 1987): 481.

<sup>2</sup> Charles M. Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1997), 4; Minutes of Alabama SNCC Workshop, April 21-23, 1965, Box 3, Mary E. King Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.

<sup>3</sup> Quote Taylor Branch in *New York Times Magazine*, February 21, 1993, in James J. Podesta, “Robert Parris Moses,” Gale Contemporary Black Biography, entry posted 2006, <http://www.answers.com/topic/robert-parris-moses> (accessed September 16, 2007); Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi: The Classic Autobiography of Growing Up Poor and Black in the Rural South* (New York: Bentam Dell, 1968), 274; Mississippi’s ‘Freedom Summer’ Reviewed, conference October 30-November 2, 1979, transcript, Session 2, Folder 3, Mississippi’s Freedom Summer Reviewed Collection, Wisconsin State Historical Society; Huggins, “Martin Luther King, Jr.: Charisma and Leadership,” 478.

wave and the ocean, that is, between Robert Moses and the grassroots movement in Mississippi. By doing so, new insight can be obtained into the *process*, or the nuts and bolts, of how ‘facilitating indigenous leadership’ worked in practice. This approach also clarifies the role that SNCC’s unique organizational culture played in allowing individuals, like Moses, to thrive and in making ‘facilitation’ as an organizing approach work.

Bob Moses (b. 1935), a New York math teacher with a Harvard degree in philosophy, was one of SNCC’s defining faces between 1961 and 1965. SNCC, which emerged from the 1960 sit-in movement and withered at the end of the decade, worked in eleven Southern states and enjoyed particular success in direct action and voter registration. Before it adopted a more bureaucratized structure and became a key advocate of Black Power from 1965 onwards, it operated through “group-centered leadership” and dealt with internal conflict through a quest for consensus. Because SNCC-workers felt they were held together by a shared sense of ‘spirit’ rather than a defined ideology, they tried to treat everyone’s opinion as equally worthy of consideration. Although SNCC’s loose organization at times hindered its effectiveness, it allowed for flexibility and diversity. Field experiments rather than policies planned in its central office in Atlanta determined its direction, although this sometimes made it difficult to pinpoint its objectives. “SNCC keeps reexamining its assumptions, changing its ideas,” one reporter wrote in 1965, “Abstract theories about this volatile and kaleidoscopic movement quickly become as dated as last seasons’ batting averages.”<sup>4</sup>

In fact, SNCC did not see itself as an organization made to last but rather as a *movement* in which King’s dream of the ‘beloved community’—a society in which genuine interpersonal living based in justice as well as love was possible—was already acted out. According to SNCC-historian Emily Stoper, SNCC fit none of Max Weber’s “ideal types” of leadership, that is, “bureaucratic, charismatic, or traditional.” Founded on what SNCC-worker Mary King called “an existential theory of organization—you are what you believe,” it rather fitted the description of a “redemptive organization,” which scholar James Wilson defined as one that “seeks not only to change society and its institutions, but also to change its members by requiring them to exemplify in their own lives the new order.”<sup>5</sup>

Martin Luther King and his organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), pioneered the existentialist approach of suffering alongside local blacks during protests rather than remaining safely within their headquarters as previous black leaders had done. This distinguished the movement that emerged in the South after 1955 from the tradition of activism associated with the nation’s oldest civil rights organization, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). SNCC took this idea to new levels. Unlike the NAACP or SCLC, which mostly worked in urban areas, it moved to the most dangerous rural areas in the Deep South—“the heart of darkness”—and vowed to stay there until change had come. Even Mississippi NAACP president Aaron Henry could not believe this boldness, which he characterized in 1965 as near madness: “[Only] fools rush in where angels fear to tread.” Promoting action over words, SNCC-workers lived with the black poor on a daily basis, and refused to be intimidated by jail, violence, or death. Such incidents even became badges of courage, as evidenced by a 1962 *Saturday Evening Post* report of workers’ “self-made ‘diplomas’ proclaiming that the holder has served time in a Southern prison.” SNCC, one of its former workers noted, “set the pace in terms of commitment... [P]articipation in the struggle was to be based on a...willingness to risk life and limb...[Y]ou cannot

<sup>4</sup> Jack Newfield, *A Prophetic Minority: The American New Left* (London: Anthony Blondt, 1966), 99.

<sup>5</sup> Mary King, *Freedom Song: A Personal Story of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Quill, William Morrow, and Company, 1987), 483-484; Emily Stoper, “The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee: Rise and Fall of a Redemptive Organization,” *Journal of Black Studies* 8, no. 1 (September 1977): 14-15; Emily Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee: The Growth of Radicalism in a Civil Rights Organization* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1989), 71, 122. For King’s views on the ‘beloved community’, see among others John J. Ansbro, *Martin Luther King, Jr. The Making of a Mind* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1986), 90, 187.

find a national organization making struggle on this level a requirement for participation, a matter of national organizational policy.”<sup>6</sup>

Moses exemplified this organizational philosophy. He presented himself as a facilitator of indigenous black leadership rather than a figure of authority, which projected a sense of humility as a leader that enhanced his moral influence. He promoted ‘moral leadership by example,’ electing to live under the same wretched conditions as the local people who formed the core of SNCC’s work force. He thereby challenged conventional concepts of leadership and rejected the distinction between leaders and followers.

To facilitate the organization of local communities, Moses and SNCC not only built on the foundations laid by older local activists, mostly from the NAACP, but also implemented new techniques. The latter culminated in SNCC’s most ambitious project, Freedom Summer, and the formation of the MFDP (Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party) in 1964. These projects brought widespread attention to conditions in the state and formed key incentives for the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. They also, however, exacerbated SNCC’s internal disputes over race, class, structure, and strategy. Greatly discouraged about future possibilities for change, Moses withdrew from SNCC in 1965. He briefly involved himself in the anti-Vietnam War movement before fleeing to Canada and then to Africa to avoid the draft. Although all historians acknowledge his significance for the civil rights movement, Moses’ contribution has been the subject of only one, rather brief, biography.

## 1.2. Theoretical Framework: Debates in Civil Rights Movement Historiography

Questions about the role of leadership and organizations in the promotion of social change have always been at the center of movement studies. Yet over time scholarly interests have shifted, raising new questions regarding space and locality, reperiodization, and continuity in activism. The concept of the ‘long civil rights movement,’ a term Jacquelyn Dowd Hall coined in 2005, is now used to typify a large body of works that stress either one or more of these issues.<sup>7</sup> Generally speaking, however, one can divide movement historiography into two streams, a ‘classical’ and a ‘revisionist’ phase. The first two decades following the movement’s peak in the early to mid-1960s represented the first phase and the last two/three decades the second. There are of course notable exceptions to this generalization and this shift has been gradual rather than abrupt.<sup>8</sup>

The first books on the civil rights movement, written in the 1960s and early 1970s, reflected analyses of how it was viewed at the time of its heyday, that is, “as spontaneous and discontinuous with previous struggles.” Its participants, in particular national civil rights leaders and most notably King, were presented as saint-like figures. They were seen as distinct from ordinary blacks, as one contemporary

<sup>6</sup> Aaron Henry, interview by KZSU Radio Station Stanford University, 1965, transcript, KZSU Project South Interview Collection, Microfiche 2479 (E), Library of Congress, Washington DC; Ben H. Bagdikian, “Negro’s Youth’s New March on Dixie,” *Saturday Evening Post*, September 8, 1962; Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, ed., *Circle of Trust: Remembering SNCC* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 183.

<sup>7</sup> See Jacqueline Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 2005): 1233-1263.

<sup>8</sup> For example see William H. Chafe’s local study of Greensboro, North Carolina, as early as 1980 (*Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980)) and Wesley Hogan’s close-up research of SNCC as late as 2007 (*Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC’s Dream For a New America*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007)). There are also historians that have explored both avenues, like Adam Fairclough who wrote a study of SCLC (*To Redeem the Soul of America*) and a local study of the civil rights movement in Louisiana (*Race & Democracy*). Clayborne Carson is known for his close-up analysis of SNCC (*In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981)), but he was also one of the first historians to plead for a bottom-up approach to the movement.



sociologist said, because they had a “higher awareness of the wider society” and were “more prone to develop the particular set of attitudes and perceptions that lead to protest.” Their heroism was even more apparent in the midst of the gun-toting Black Power militancy and race riots that had swept the country by this time. Both found little understanding from a national audience. “The Black Power era,” scholar Kathryn Nasstrom observed, then “serve[d] as a ‘tragic epilogue’ to the grand narrative, lacking the moral clarity of the earlier movement and without its efficacy.”<sup>9</sup>

David L. Lewis’ 1970 biography of King, although written to undercut his romanticization, set the pattern of viewing the movement through King’s life. For a long time, the dominant ‘master narrative’—and the term ‘civil rights movement’ itself—referred to the years 1954-1965. This was seen as a unique episode in American history that started with the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court ruling outlawing segregated education and the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott, which made King a national figure. It faded after the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and died completely when King did. To scholars of the 1970s and 1980s, King and his like were attractive because their “sacrifices to transform their country...contrasted sharply with the prevailing Reagan-era mentality that glorified...personal wealth and ignored community health.”<sup>10</sup>

Between the late 1960s to late 1980s historians usually focused on what scholar Bret Eynon called “organizations and events that had drawn national media attention during the 1960s.” As historian Steven Lawson put it, they “conceived of the civil rights struggle as primarily a political movement that secured legislative and judicial triumphs,” echoed by the word ‘rights’ in its name. Numerous studies pinpointed specific organizations and leaders, or local cases that had national significance.<sup>11</sup> The movement was thus explained through “top-down accounts that emphasized national issues” and its success credited to “King’s charisma, white liberal politicians, northern white patronage, the labor-liberal alliance, and/or the media’s televised exposure of southern racial violence.”<sup>12</sup>

In the mid-1980s, following William Chafe’s work on Greensboro, North Carolina, and Robert Norrell’s 1985 study of Tuskegee, Alabama, scholars began to challenge this narrative. The notion “that King was not only the major national spokesman for the black struggle but also its prime instigator,” historian Clayborne Carson asserted in 1986, contradicted the fact that “hundreds of southern communities were disrupted by sustained protest movements that lasted, in some cases, for years.” He suggested substituting the term ‘civil rights movement’ with ‘black freedom struggle’

<sup>9</sup> Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang, “The ‘Long Movement’ as Vampire: Temporal and Spatial Fallacies in Recent Black Freedom Studies,” *Journal of African American History* 92, no. 2 (March 2007): 266; Clayborne Carson, “Civil Rights Reform and the Black Freedom Struggle,” in *The Civil Rights Movement in America*, ed. Charles W. Eagles (Jackson and London: University of Mississippi Press, 1986), 21; Kathryn L. Nasstrom, “Between Memory and History: Autobiographies of the Civil Rights Movement and the Writing of Civil Rights History,” *Journal of Southern History* 74, no. 2 (May 2008): 325-364.

<sup>10</sup> Steven F. Lawson, “Freedom Then, Freedom Now: The Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement,” *American Historical Review* 96, no. 2 (April 1991): 456. For specific definitions of this ‘classical phase’ and its periodization, see above mentioned articles by Hall and by Cha-Jua and Lang.

<sup>11</sup> Examples of studies on specific leaders and organizations are August Meier and Elliott Rudwick’s 1973 study of CORE, Clayborne Carson’s 1980 history of SNCC, Mark Tushnet’s 1987 work on the NAACP, and a large body of works on King and SCLC (e.g. David Garrow’s 1986 *Bearing the Cross*, Taylor Branch’s trilogy, Thomas Peake’s history of SCLC (1987), and biographies of King by Lerone Bennett (1968), Stephen Oates (1982), and others) and examples of local studies include David Garrow’s *Protest at Selma* (1978), David Colburn’s study of St. Augustine (1985), and Joan Beifuss on Memphis (1985).

<sup>12</sup> Bret Eynon, “Cast upon the Shore: Oral History and New Scholarship on the Movements of the 1960s,” *Journal of American History* 83, no. 2 (September 1996): 560; Lawson, “Freedom Then, Freedom Now,” 456, 457; Cha-Jua and Lang, “The ‘Long Movement’ as Vampire,” 266; Adam Fairclough, “State of the Art: Historians and the Civil Rights Movement,” *Journal of American Studies* 24, no. 3 (December 1990): 393.

in order to emphasize its broad and diverse agenda, and to underline the “continuity between the period before 1965 and the period after,” the Black Power era.<sup>13</sup>

Reflecting this insight, historians then shifted their attention. “King and the other well-known players would not disappear from view,” Lawson noted, but they now took “a back seat to women and men who initiated protests in small towns and cities across the South and who acted according to their own needs rather than those of central organizations headquartered in New York, Washington, or Atlanta.” This led to a body of works, pioneered by sociologist Aldon Morris, that stressed the ‘resource mobilization theory,’ that is, how “preexisting indigenous African American social networks and organizations,” like the black church, historically black educational institutions, and black business and civic organizations, formed the basis from which the 1960s movement sprung. It also produced an abundance of studies on specific cities or states, including several works that treated civil rights struggles in the North.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, in extending their purview to the North, scholars Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang noted, some questioned “the distinctions earlier scholars made between southern *de jure* and northern *de facto* segregation,” and even placed the “black freedom struggles for fair employment, open housing, quality education, and equitable criminal justice outside the South at the forefront” of the overall struggle. Historians Joseph Crespino and Matthew Lassiter, for instance, openly called to reject “the framework of Southern exceptionalism” that treats “southern history in false opposition to an idealized national standard” by diminishing regional characteristics to mere “differences of degree.”<sup>15</sup>

In an extreme example of this revisionist reading, sometimes called ‘the local people approach,’ historian J. Mills Thornton even argued that during the civil rights struggles in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma, Alabama—which ascertained King’s reputation as a national civil rights leader—the role of ‘outside’ organizations and leaders was negligible. Instead he described social change as a mere outgrowth of local perceptions, assumptions, and interests dependent on municipal political culture. He thereby treated the struggles as if they occurred in a vacuum, unaffected by cosmopolitan influences or changes: “Just as local politics was essential to the creation of southern segregation, so local politics was the crucial factor in creating the circumstances that ended it.”<sup>16</sup>

By emphasizing local communities, previously unknown or little known local leaders, and historical black institutions, scholars found that their stories often had to start well before 1955 and continue well past 1965. Some noted that nationalism and self-defense were already evident during the movement’s ‘classical’ phase, which led to a new appraisal of the ‘Black Power’ era, exemplified in the works of Timothy Tyson, Lance Hill, and Joseph Peniel. Others, like Jacqueline Dowd Hall, contended that the movement’s origins were to be found in the 1930s and 1940s, and disputed the conventional wisdom that the movement died in the late 1960s—hence Hall’s term ‘Long Movement.’ “From the caldron of the Great Depression and crested in the 1940s,” Hall wrote, a “powerful social movement” came into being, “sparked by the alchemy of laborites, civil rights activists, progressive New Dealers, and black and white

<sup>13</sup> Carson, “Civil Rights Reform and the Black Freedom Struggle,” in *The Civil Rights Movement in America*, ed. Eagles, 23-26, 28. See also above mentioned article by Steven Lawson.

<sup>14</sup> Examples of these are John Dittmer’s *Local People* (1994), Charles Payne’s *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom* (1995), Adam Fairclough’s *Race & Democracy* (1995), Todd Moya’s *Let the People Decide* (2004), Emilye Crosby’s *A Little Taste of Freedom* (2005), Hasan Kwame Jeffries’ *Bloody Lowndes* (2009), and the essay-collection *Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Movements in America* (2005) edited by Jeanne Theoharis and Komoyi Woodard. Examples of studies on civil rights struggles in the North are Martha Biondi’s study of post-war New York City (2003) and Thomas Sugrue’s *Sweet Land of Liberty* (2008).

<sup>15</sup> Lawson, “Freedom Then, Freedom Now,” 457; Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: The Free Press, 1984), xii; Cha-Jua and Lang, “The ‘Long Movement’ as Vampire,” 267, 268; Matthew D. Lassiter and Joseph Crespino, eds., *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 8-12.

<sup>16</sup> J. Mills Thornton, *Dividing Lines: Municipal Politics and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006), 3, 9, 12-13.

radicals.” As such, they turned the activism of the ‘Old Left’—the overarching term used for the combined group of these, often Marxist-related, activists—into the “decisive first phase” of the modern civil rights movement. Scholars highlighting this trend<sup>17</sup> emphasize the so-called ‘civil rights unionism’ or ‘Black Popular Front’ of the 1930s and 1940s that “sought to combine protection from [racial] discrimination with universalistic social welfare policies and individual rights with labor rights.”<sup>18</sup>

In doing so, however, such academics offered a controversial political reading of the movement. Following Robert Korstad’s and Nelson Lichtenstein’s 1988 key publication,<sup>19</sup> some, like Roger Horowitz, Glenda Gilmore, and Jacqueline Dowd Hall, even claimed that the Communist-based leadership in the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) made the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) the cutting-edge of the racial struggle. Indeed, without the red-baiting of the Truman-Eisenhower years, they assert, the labor movement could have gone a long way towards altering American society’s racially discriminatory structure. “For a few short years in the late 1940s,” one wrote, “the American people had more political options than they would ever have again. McCarthyism destroyed those.” In reappraising the role of the CPUSA and emphasizing the importance of civil rights unionism, they subsequently criticized the ‘classical’ civil rights movement of 1955-1965 as too legalistic, too middle-class, and too conservative. According to Hall, civil rights unionism provided a “more robust, more progressive, and *truer* story” of the black freedom struggle, even though Eric Arnesen, Manfred Berg, and others have persuasively critiqued these scholars for “ignoring the [CPUSA’s] less savory practices, and neglecting or minimizing non-communist and anticommunist activists.”<sup>20</sup>

The CPUSA, Arnesen for instance objected, was “from the outset, fatally flawed by the party’s antidemocratic structure and its subservience to the Soviet Union.” Despite its laudable commitment to racial discrimination in the Scottsboro case<sup>21</sup> and its support of anti-lynching bills and ‘Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work’-campaigns, it could never be the driving-force behind the 1930s and 1940s civil rights movement at large. “Its ideological twists and turns on the race question,” Berg pointed out, were simply too “extremely erratic.” Its decision that the “victory over fascism had to take precedence over all other objectives, including the civil rights struggle” after Hitler’s breach of the 1939 Hitler-Stalin Pact for instance testifies to this. Internal factional rivalries and financial struggles additionally hampered its effectiveness.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, as scholar Robert Allen already critiqued in the 1980s, blacks often flirted with the CPUSA for pragmatic reasons and a genuine relationship could never really bear fruit as the Party, especially with its secular, anti-institutionalized religion stance, was too alienated from the black community as a whole. It neither fully understood African-Americans’ historical experience nor their desire for a black-led movement. Treating American racism as a mere capitalist creation in order to divide workers that could be overcome by a white-led working class revolution, it “responded to racism organizationally instead

<sup>17</sup> Examples are Maurice Isserman’s *If I Had A Hammer* (1987); Michael Honey’s *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights* (1993); Roger Horowitz’ “*Negro and White Unite and Fight!*” (1997); Bruce Nelson’s *Divided We Stand* (2001); Robert Korstad’s *Civil Rights Unionism* (2003); and Glenda Gilmore’s *Defying Dixie* (2008).

<sup>18</sup> For a full criticism of the ‘Long Civil Rights Movement’ reading of the movement, see Cha-Jua and Lang, “The ‘Long Movement’ as Vampire,” 265-288, Charles W. Eagles, “Toward New Histories of the Civil Rights Era,” *Journal of Southern History* 66 (November 2000): 815-848, Fairclough, “State of the Art,” 387-398, and Lawson, “Freedom Then, Freedom Now,” 456-471.

<sup>19</sup> See Robert R. Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, “Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement,” *Journal of American History* 75 (December, 1988): 786-811.

<sup>20</sup> Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” 1235; Manfred Berg, “Black Civil Rights and Liberal Anticommunism: The NAACP in the Early Cold War,” *Journal of American History* 94, no.1 (June 2007): 76; Eric Arnesen, “Reconsidering the ‘Long Civil Rights Movement,’” *Historically Speaking* 10, no. 2 (April 2009): 33.

<sup>21</sup> In 1931 nine black boys were falsely accused of and sentenced to death for raping a white girl in Alabama. The CPUSA played a significant role in their prolonged battle for justice (they were tried 3 times), leading to the release of four of them.

<sup>22</sup> Arnesen, “Reconsidering the ‘Long Civil Rights Movement,’” 33; Berg, “Black Civil Rights and Liberal Anticommunism,” 77-78.

of ideologically.” While it put racists in its own ranks on trial or expelled them, it did little to educate its members. On average, CPUSA-historian Harvey Klehr indicated, the latter were white blue-collar workers below the age of 40, often of Eastern-European descent. These were exactly the type of workers that labor-historian Bruce Nelson claimed characteristically fought for a place in the employment hierarchy by exacerbating racial and ethnic identities, that is, by trying to become accepted as “white.” A long-term alliance between blacks and the CPUSA leading to fundamental social change was therefore just as “utterly unrealistic” as that between black and white workers “[g]iven the notorious racism of the American labor movement.”<sup>23</sup>

As such, Manfred Berg asserted, arguing that anti-communist attacks by moderate civil rights organizations like the NAACP or black leaders like A. Philip Randolph had no validity and merely amounted to ‘redbaiting’ is flawed reasoning. Even without McCarthyism it was a questionable move for the NAACP “to align itself with a political force with which it had often clashed in the past, whose key ideological commitments it did not share, and that was widely viewed with suspicion.” Neither did (black moderates’) anti-communism abort the infant civil rights movement. As Berg demonstrated, “critics grossly exaggerate the [NAACP’s] participation in the anticommunist crusade” and it “consistently supported liberal social policies that would benefit not only blacks, but all poor Americans.” Trying to safeguard its survival “under constraints that defy all political and moral certainties,” its discursive politics in fact “helped prevent the cause of civil rights from being discredited along with Communism” and thereby “laid the foundations for the achievements of later years.” Likewise the work of non-leftist black unions like the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and the National Negro Congress kept the fight for racial equality alive throughout the 1940s and 1950s. Accordingly “‘long movement’ scholarship,” Arnesen agreed, “runs the risk of substituting a romantic and overly celebratory narrative for a much messier and more complicated civil rights past.”<sup>24</sup>

Today the ‘Long Civil Rights Movement’ has nonetheless become a popular phrase in historical scholarship, and even, to quote scholars Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang, “the dominant theoretical interpretation of the modern ‘Civil Rights’ and ‘Black Power’ movements.” Yet historians employ the concept in different ways. To some the phrase highlights the way that the Old Left fought against racial discrimination and economic inequality in the 1930s and 1940s. To others the phrase stresses chronological continuities of all kinds that link the movement’s ‘classical’ phase with what came before and what came after. This approach plays down, for example, the distinction between the civil rights movement and Black Power. Finally, historians use the “long movement” concept to underline the importance of local leaders as the initiators of social change. The ‘Long Movement’ is thus something of a ‘catch-all’ phrase that is used to differentiate older studies that put the responsibility for social change on exceptional individuals and specific organizations from ones that recognize the “black freedom struggle,” in Clayborne Carson’s words, as a bottom-up, “locally based mass movement” with a multiplicity of agents, voices, and goals.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. Berg; Robert Allen, *Reluctant Reformers: Racism and Social Reform Movements in the United States* (Washington DC: Howard University Press, 1983), 216-226; Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (New York: Basic Books, Inc, 1984); Bruce Nelson, *Divided We Stand: American Workers and the Struggle for Equality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>24</sup> Arnesen, “Reconsidering the ‘Long Civil Rights Movement,’” 32-33; Berg, “Black Civil Rights and Liberal Anticommunism,” 76-79, 81, 83-89.

<sup>25</sup> Cha-Jua and Lang, “The ‘Long Movement’ as Vampire,” 265, 267, 269; Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” 1233-1263; Carson, “Civil Rights Reform and the Black Freedom Struggle,” in *The Civil Rights Movement in America*, ed. Eagles, 23; Albert and Hoffman, eds., *We Shall Overcome*, 6. See also works by Jeffrey Ogbar, Komozi Woodard and Jeanne Theoharis, and Lance Hill’s *The Deacons for Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement* (2006), Timothy B. Tyson’s *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (1999), and Joseph Peniel’s *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights—Black Power Era* (2006).



### 1.3. The Place of Robert Parris Moses in Civil Rights Movement Historiography

Discussions of Robert Moses within civil rights movement historiography have consistently emphasized at least one of three points: 1. his representation as a legendary figure (stressing the ‘Bob Moses mystique’), 2. his personification of SNCC’s public’s image of group-centered leadership, and 3. his embodiment of community organizing. Studies also tend to portray him as a tragic hero: an idealist so disillusioned by the movement’s inability to produce lasting social change, and so unhappy with the hero-worship of his persona that he stopped speaking to whites and left for Africa. As such, his life is almost a parable of SNCC’s and the overall movement’s demise.

Books that appeared in the mid-1960s generally highlight the ‘Bob Moses mystique.’ While meaning different things to different people, on the whole this concept refers to Moses’ exceptional personality traits, which are said to include his bravery, intellect, sensitivity, and calmness. These traits were real enough: all the movement veterans interviewed for this dissertation indicated that the ‘Bob Moses mystique’ was authentic, readily apparent upon meeting him. Yet this aspect of Moses’ activism seems particularly prominent in the work of (Northern) white middle-class authors, in contemporaneous times but also in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s.

White liberal authors in the 1960s generally identified with the student movement. They connected SNCC to the overall emergence of young people/students as a major political force in the 1960s, as exemplified by the National Student Association and other groups. Characterized by its roots in universities, churches, and existentialist philosophies, this movement became known as the ‘New Left,’ to differentiate from the old activism of the 1930s and 1940s based on socialism, Marxism, and labor unions. Several such authors, like historians Howard Zinn and Staughton Lynd and journalist Ben Bagdikian, were activists themselves, and some even closely linked to SNCC, which gave their work a certain level of authority. Nonetheless, in order to promote SNCC’s politics they followed a particular pattern of how to view the movement, stressing the students’ youth, idealism, and spontaneity at the cost of previous generations. As Zinn put it: “All Americans owe [SNCC-workers] a debt for...releasing the idealism locked so long inside a nation that has not recently tasted the drama of social upheaval...Theirs was the silent generation until they spoke.” Consequently, local activists and continuity in civil rights activism were hardly present in their work. In addition SNCC-workers were described as a homogenous group, often motivated by religion, with the same goals: “[T]hey are young, they are Negro, they come from the South, their families are...of the working class, but they have been to college...[T]hey have no party, no ideology, no creed [but] know clearly that the values of present American society—and this goes beyond racism to class distinction, to commercialism, to profit-seeking, to the setting of religious or national barriers against human contact—are not for them.”<sup>26</sup>

White liberals’ work therefore often resembled near hero-worship of the SNCC students. Bagdikian called them “one of the most fiercely united, dynamic and optimistic social movements of our time.” Zinn concurred: “The nation has suddenly become aware that the initiative today is in the hands of these 150 young [SNCC] people who have moved into the Deep South...To be with them...is to feel the presence of greatness.” Within this student body, however, Bob Moses was singled out as exceptionally heroic. In *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (1965), southern-born novelist Robert Penn Warren—a onetime defender of racial segregation—highlighted the “powerful appeal of [Moses’] personality” and his “extraordinary calmness.” He underscored this observation with a story of how Moses had fallen asleep during a car chase by armed whites. Howard Zinn, in *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (1965), and journalist Jack Newfield, in *A Prophetic Minority* (1966), pictured Moses as an almost larger-than-life, modern-day Lucky Luke on a mission down South. When relating his dangerous, lone ventures in Mississippi, they

<sup>26</sup> Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), 2, 10, 13.

stressed his acts of courage, as he “planned a campaign to dismantle, stone by stone, the prison that was Mississippi.” Moses even emerged as a romantic existentialist hero, resembling figures like Albert Camus, whose philosophies he took with him to Mississippi and who had cult-status among white liberals. Newfield idealized Moses as the personification of Camus’ concept of action; he described his first trip to Mississippi as “the most creative and heroic single act anyone in the New Left has attempted.” Newfield even claimed that act to be the basic inspiration for the New Left as a whole: “Certainly much of the subsequent history of the New Left has flowed from that existentialist act of [Moses] disappearing alone into the most violent and desolate section of Mississippi.”<sup>27</sup>

However, in associating Moses with the predominantly white and mainly Northern New Left, Newfield and others projected onto Moses what they wanted to see rather than giving an accurate assessment of who he was. Their work does not offer any analysis of his daily activities or the influences from the black community that shaped his ideas. It seems that what made Moses appear exceptional to these writers was his Northern and (white elite) academic background; they were less interested in the nuts-and-bolts of his activism than in the fact that he gave up a relatively comfortable life for a dangerous mission. Moses embodied what Staughton Lynd called the ideal of the ‘scholar-activist’ in the tradition of American heroes like Ralph Emerson who followed, as C. van Woodward said, the credo that “the intellectual must not be alienated from the sources of revolt” and had “thrown themselves into the popular movements of their day.”<sup>28</sup>

The 1980s/early 1990s offered renewed interest in SNCC and Moses, after a lull in the 1970s.<sup>29</sup> In the 1980s SNCC regained its place in academic debates following the publication of several SNCC-veterans’ memoirs<sup>30</sup> and the appearance of studies that treated SNCC in depth. This provided for a more extensive analysis of Moses’ leadership. Clayborne Carson’s *In Struggle* (1981), Emily Stoper’s *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee* (1989), and Taylor Branch’s *America in the King Years*-trilogy (1989, 1998, 2006) all highlighted Moses as the personification of SNCC and its ideals. “Ironically,” Branch noted, “it was Moses, so mindless of image and self-advancement, who shaped the public perception of the early SNCC,” because “Moses was the anti-King within SNCC. By immersing himself for years in the persecution of rural Mississippi, and subordinating his Harvard education to folk wisdom, he acquired stature that defined grassroots SNCC culture.” According to Carson, Moses’ approach was “the most singular part of SNCC’s legacy” and set “SNCC’s radicalism apart from most other reform or revolutionary organizations.” SNCC’s departure from this approach for a more hierarchical structure and a racially exclusive ideology, Carson believed, was an understandable yet regrettable mistake. This view is echoed in later studies like Payne’s *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom* (1997) and Hogan’s *Many Minds, One Heart* (2007).<sup>31</sup>

By depicting Moses as *the* symbol of leadership by example, however, some writers overemphasize his existentialist quest for individual freedom. Branch, for example, asserted that he “was a mystical purist.

<sup>27</sup> Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*, 2, 15, 62, 65; Ben H. Bagdikian, “Negro’s Youth’s New March on Dixie,” *Saturday Evening Post*, September 8, 1962. Robert Penn Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), 48-49, 114, 403; Newfield, *A Prophetic Minority*, 73, 78.

<sup>28</sup> Staughton Lynd. “SNCC: The Beginning of Ideology,” August 1964, Box 1, Mary King Papers. Lynd quotes from C. Van Woodward’s 1959 essay “The Populist Heritage and the Intellectual.”

<sup>29</sup> This silence can partly be attributed to the aftermath of the general condemnation of the Black Power era, the nation’s preoccupation with the Vietnam War, and partly to historians’ focus on Martin Luther King.

<sup>30</sup> These include James Forman’s *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1985), Mary King’s *Freedom Song* (1987), Cleveland Sellers’ and Robert Terrell’s *The River of No Return: The Autobiography of a Black Militant and the Life and Death of SNCC* (Jackson and London: University of Mississippi Press, 1990) and Sally Belfrage’s *Freedom Summer* (Charlotte and London: University Press of Virginia, 1990).

<sup>31</sup> Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), 519; Taylor Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-68* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 30; Carson, *In Struggle*, 303.

He valued SNCC for the succor it provided to like-minded people, but he remained aloof from the more pragmatic functions of an organization, such as fund-raising, discipline, and publicity.” While there are elements of truth in this, in practice Moses had a significant hand in the day-to-day operations of projects. Stoper even described him as an “exponent of anarchist ideas,” a characterization that Moses himself would scarcely recognize.<sup>32</sup>

In typifying Moses as an ‘anti-leader,’ all three writers dwell upon his ambivalence about the “worshipful cult” he acquired in SNCC. Branch recorded how Moses “tumbled through doubts that his anti-leadership convictions merely shielded him from inevitable responsibility” and how “his self-effacing reluctance enlarged his mystique and the hunger of people to follow him.” All three emphasized this as the main reason why Moses left the organization in 1965. In doing so they attributed immense personal influence to him. Carson insisted that no-one was able “to fill the leadership vacuum created by Moses’ withdrawal,” implying that his decision to turn away at one of SNCC’s most crucial crossroads proved pivotal for the organization. Stoper concurred: “Largely because of Moses’ leadership role, the Mississippi project was for a long time the nucleus of SNCC’s program and outlook....After Moses left the state in January 1965, Mississippi quickly waned as a center of SNCC activity.”<sup>33</sup>

These authors depict Moses as *the* driving force behind the production of social change in Mississippi; he holds the initiative, rather than a two-way stream of others influencing him and vice versa. Neither is a history of prior activism in the state recorded. Carson and Stoper portray him as “the mastermind” behind numerous local movements’ endeavors and Branch slipped into sentences like “by lifting up the innate capacities of all citizens, he helped *discover*...leaders such as an unlettered orator from Mississippi, Fannie Lou Hamer.”<sup>34</sup>

The only biography of Moses to date, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them* (1994) by attorney Eric Burner, reinforces this image of Moses. Burner’s interest is in how Moses’ “presence and leadership style offer an entrance...into a decade that set radicals to pursuing purity and to practicing, at times, a democracy of incessant action.” He emphasized Moses’ embodiment of group-centered leadership and attributed epic characteristics to him: he represented “a leader who encouraged but did not command” and who sought “not to be reborn but simply to do right” by “working unobtrusively and with unostentatious courage among the wretched.” This depiction is further enhanced by his general exclusion of other (local and professional) activists. Burner’s account of how social change is produced thus seems to revolve around exceptional individuals. Because he mostly described rather than analyzed, he did not provide any strong arguments or explicit conclusions regarding Moses’ life, activism, or leadership. Although he conceded that Moses could be pragmatic—he was “not an idealist removed from daily, tangible business” and could “effectively act as a liberal social scientist and liberal bureaucrat”—Burner’s somewhat romanticized depiction of Moses dominates his biography.<sup>35</sup>

Local studies of the Mississippi movement, most notably John Dittmer’s *Local People* (1994) and Charles Payne’s *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom* (1995), both altered and confirmed the established image of Moses. By emphasizing the activism of dozens of professional or ad hoc local organizations and individuals in Mississippi from the 1940s to the 1980s, these studies found that SNCC’s and Moses’ experiences were hardly unique. They demonstrated that civil rights activism existed before, during, and after SNCC’s presence. This implied that although Moses’ departure may have weakened SNCC, it did not mark the end

<sup>32</sup> Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 518; Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 107.

<sup>33</sup> Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 78, 83-84; Carson, *In Struggle*, 140, 156-157, 242, 303; Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963-65* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 55, 222; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 519; Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge*, 30.

<sup>34</sup> Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge*, 30. Italics in the word ‘discover’ are mine.

<sup>35</sup> Eric Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them: Robert Parris Moses and Civil Rights in Mississippi* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1994), 4, 8, 31, 47, 53-4, 69-70, 90, 92-93, 105, 112, 206-207.

of the Mississippi movement. While providing new insight into Moses' daily activities, Dittmer and Payne portray him less as a leader than a facilitator of local activism, treating his decisions predominantly as an outgrowth of his commitment to grassroots leadership.<sup>36</sup>

Payne especially expanded this reading of Moses and SNCC, which he captured as a group that "built on and elaborated that legacy" of organizational and intellectual continuity that local activists supplied. SNCC's job is shown as "simply building relationships," and therefore the "proper measure of [its] work is the extent to which the people they helped bring into political activity became leaders themselves." Moses is used to verbalize an alternative view on the production of social change: "The leadership is there. If you go out and work with your people, then the leadership will emerge...We don't know who they are now; we don't need to know...the leadership will emerge from the movement that emerges." While Payne admitted that Moses "was responsible for much of what made the Mississippi movement distinctive," he is described as bringing unique organizing skills, but applying them in humility. Payne and others present him as a product of the black community and have relatively little to say about the cosmopolitan influences on his life.<sup>37</sup>

Since local studies by their format generally exclude SNCC-projects and civil rights activism in other states, however, the image of the decentralized, community organizing Mississippi branch of SNCC as representative of *overall* SNCC is maintained. By extension, since Moses played a visible role in the Mississippi movement, he hence continues to represent (the best of) SNCC's public image. Yet what's different is that he and SNCC are no longer placed in the forefront of social change; they are 'following' more than 'leading.'

Moses himself seems to embrace this version of history most. His semi-autobiography *Radical Equations* (2001) does not tell a story of an exceptional individual, but solely of an instrument for indigenous leadership whose potential had always been present. He for instance tells the story of his beating in McComb—a heroic act that many scholarly works describe in detail—in a single page. Rather than dwelling upon himself, he underlined the courage of the locals with him: "It is remarkable that the two men didn't flee and I still find it difficult to know what they reached into for the courage."<sup>38</sup>

Yet *Radical Equations* provides little new insight into Moses, apart from providing some new information about his family background. This is because it is not a traditional autobiography. First, Moses had a minor role in writing it; SNCC-worker Charles Cobb was the dominant author, and Cobb mostly transcribed Moses' answers from earlier interviews. Second, only half of the book deals with Moses' experiences in the civil rights movement; the other half treats his Algebra Project (see chapter 11) which he developed in the 1980s. The part on the movement, moreover, is only a stepping stone to the story of the Algebra Project. Consequently, no room is given to his views on many of the important events of the movement. The story even stops short after 1964, avoiding any discussion of his departure from SNCC.

Moses' view of himself as a facilitator, however, contrasts starkly with the picture that emerges from many of the memoirs of SNCC veterans. These resemble earlier 1960s accounts, burnishing the image of a respected and trusted leader who had a clear vision for the movement. Moses, as Cleveland Sellers indicated, was "a special SNCC person" who had "something about him...that seemed to draw all of us to him." James Forman recollected how his "admiration for Bob Moses and his band of guerrilla fighters swelled up" and Stokely Carmichael noted he was "influenced by him in fundamental and lasting ways." When Moses asked him to be the director of Mississippi's Second Congressional District he "was moved, overwhelmed as much by the responsibility as by Bob's confidence. To be appointed to that job, and by

<sup>36</sup> John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 319.

<sup>37</sup> Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 3-4, 180, 238, 243, 332.

<sup>38</sup> Robert P. Moses and Charles E. Cobb, *Radical Equations: Civil Rights from Mississippi to the Algebra Project* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 26.

Bob? I couldn't believe it." Mary King even described feeling "a sudden rush of exhilaration" whenever she saw Moses: "He inspired me and touched me. I trusted Bob implicitly and felt deep affection for him. He was only thirty years old but I considered him prophetic." Such admiration even went so far that it creates doubts about the factual degree of group-centered leadership in SNCC. Moses was "the one man in SNCC who was respected and trusted enough to actually be embraced by most of our membership as a 'leader,'" its chairman John Lewis claimed, "If there was one thread that might have held it all together, it would have been Bob Moses."<sup>39</sup>

#### 1.4. Problem Areas in Civil Rights Movement Historiography and Moses' Place in It

The 'revisionist' phase in movement historiography added valuable new perspectives on the role of individual leaders and organizations in the civil rights movement. However, this study of Moses and SNCC incorporates traditional as well as revisionist approaches in movement historiography, in the belief that the 'Long Civil Rights Movement' concept is in danger of being stretched too far. As Cha-Jua and Lang contend, while 'classical' phase "civil rights historians made a fetish of movement discontinuity" by turning the 1955-1965 into an exceptional era, 'revisionist' scholars go "too far in the opposite direction." "[T]he Long Movement's major flaw is its ahistorical *totalizing perspective*," they argue, meaning its "tendency to flatten chronological, conceptual, and geographic differences." The danger in this, historian Adam Fairclough agrees, is that history becomes "a homogenized mush, without sharp breaks, and clear transitions and transformations."<sup>40</sup>

The period 1955-1965 saw civil rights activism developing new ideas, styles, and methods. Two new organizations, SCLC and SNCC, transformed the civil rights struggle in the South and gave it a fresh dynamism. The modern movement "was distinctive," Eric Arnesen concurs, "It was significantly larger than its predecessors; it was visible nationally and consistently in a way unmatched by earlier organizations; it attained a genuinely mass character; it provoked a violent backlash of unprecedented proportions; and it ultimately succeeded in toppling legalized segregation and enfranchising black Southerners." The 'classical' civil rights movement, Cha-Jua and Lang agree, "was an earthquake." There had always been grassroots activism in the South, but what was new in the 1960s was the scale and character of the support that national groups bequeathed local ones, with SNCC setting the pace.<sup>41</sup>

An overemphasis on local activism, moreover, implies that blacks in the South disposed of sufficient resources themselves—organizational, financial, political—to wage the civil rights struggle with minimal outside assistance. The contrary, in fact, was the case. The presence of *full-time* civil rights workers—indigenous or not—made a decisive difference. Without Robert Moses and SNCC it is impossible to imagine a Freedom Summer, which had a local *and* national character. To argue that a national organization like SNCC merely had to facilitate grassroots leaders begs the question why facilitation was needed to begin with. An investigation into *how* and *to what extent* this facilitation occurred will reveal the degree to which SNCC's entrance in the state constituted a break with prior activism, as well as expose continuities with what had gone before.

This study also contributes to the historiographical discussion over the relationship between North and South. 'Classical'-phase historians depicted the North as a mere supporter of the struggle in

<sup>39</sup> Sellers, *The River of No Return*, 82-3, 194; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 278, 419-420; Stokely Carmichael and Michael Ekwueme Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture)* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 310-14; John Lewis and Michael D'Orso, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (San Diego and New York: Hartcourt Brace & Company, 1998), 302-303; King, *Freedom Song*, 146.

<sup>40</sup> Cha-Jua and Lang, "The 'Long Movement' as Vampire," 273; Fairclough, "State of the Art," 388.

<sup>41</sup> Cha-Jua and Lang, "The 'Long Movement' as Vampire," 269, 273, 275; Arnesen, "Reconsidering the 'Long Civil Rights Movement,'" 34.

the South, whereas ‘Long Movement’ historians “are interested in undermining the trope of southern particularity.” Seen through the eyes of a Northerner working in a Southern-based organization, this dissertation exposes real and perceived differences in North-South continuity.<sup>42</sup>

In addition, Moses’ Ivy League background complicates historiographical debates over the relationship between ideas and activism. By stressing indigenous black institutions, ‘revisionist’ historians have emphasized organic influences over cosmopolitan ones. While earlier accounts of Moses highlighted his attraction to French existentialism and downplayed black stimuli on his thinking, later ones did the opposite. In a similar way, Steven Lawson argued, books on Martin Luther King have “create[d] an either/or proposition that lines up a predominantly Western intellectual tradition against an African-American religious heritage” rather than “a both/and situation.” This suggested that he was a typical Southern black Baptist preacher, whereas his education clearly set him apart.<sup>43</sup>

The same observation can be applied to some leaders in SNCC that most defined its direction apart from Moses, like James Forman, and, to a lesser extent, James Lawson and Tim Jenkins. They were not only older than most, but had also been exposed to international experiences, life in the North, secular or non-traditional Christian viewpoints, and high quality education in the white world. This contrasts starkly with SNCC-leaders like John Lewis, Charles Sherrod, and Fannie Lou Hamer, who were reared in impoverished Southern towns, were highly religious, and had either an average to low quality (black) college education, a limited high school education, or no formal education at all.

‘Revisionist’ accounts of the civil rights movement focus on this second cultural strand in SNCC at the expense of the first. Despite all its explanatory value, the ‘local people’ approach, by stressing the indigenous southern base of the civil rights movement, fails to acknowledge that cosmopolitan influences were crucial for SNCC’s direction. They were vital not just in bringing practical skills, but also in the articulation of a wider political vision, in terms of ideas and strategies. Even the students from black Howard University, who according to Mary King were “disproportionally influential” in SNCC, combined their organic experiences with intellectual theorizing spurred by visits from cosmopolitan-educated (black) activists like Bayard Rustin. As Moses acknowledged, the Howard students were “radicalized on the one hand by the movement and they’re radicalized on the other hand by intellectuals who are interested in these kinds of movements.”<sup>44</sup>

By stretching the movement’s periodization and accentuating continuities in tactics and goals (particularly self-defense and economic justice) some ‘long movement’ historians have additionally flattened the importance of “the intellectual and cultural dimensions” of the movement at specific moments in time. By turning the movement chiefly into an incessant quest for rights and (political) power from the 1930s to the 1980s, ideology and discourse are rendered less relevant in both explaining and producing social change. This suggests that locals’ motives for instance were disconnected from or unaffected by King’s dreams of a “beloved community,” or by events in the wider world. By analyzing social change in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma as a logical outgrowth of municipal politics, J. Mills Thornton for example diminished the Montgomery Bus Boycott as “not a revolution, merely an extension of the negotiations.” Many participants, however, attributed more meaning to it than that, as Mother Pollard, a 70-year old black woman who refused to ride the bus during the boycott, stated: “My feet is tired, but my soul is rested.” Moreover, perceptions of the world changed over time, even for people who were isolated and poorly educated. Black Mississippians visited family members in the North; they fought as soldiers in Europe, the Pacific, and Korea; they watched newsreels, read newspapers, and sometimes joined national organizations. As Cha-Jua and Lang maintained, “the theoretical and ideological lenses through which people viewed their actions matters as much as what they actually did.” It is therefore

<sup>42</sup> Cha-Jua and Lang, “The ‘Long Movement’ as Vampire,” 281.

<sup>43</sup> Lawson, “Freedom Then, Freedom Now,” 460-461; Dittmer, *Local People*, 429.

<sup>44</sup> King, *Freedom Song*, 313; Robin J. Hayes, *‘I Used the Term ‘Negro’ and I Was Firmly Corrected’: African Independence, Black Power and Channels of Diasporic Resistance* (PhD dissertation, Yale University, 2006), 160.



necessary to look at the “goals, strategy, ideology, and especially the discourse and symbols” of a given time period because even if “‘freedom’ may have been the consistent goal in each case, the meanings of ‘freedom’ and its articulations reflected the specificities of particular historical movements.”<sup>45</sup>

By reintroducing ‘classical’ approaches next to ‘revisionist’ ones, this dissertation attempts to find a balance between the wave and the ocean. The accent here on an individual leader is not intended to belittle the contribution of ordinary people to the success of the civil rights movement. Rather, a study of their interaction can lead to a better understanding of what constitutes a “movement” to begin with, and how this one related to previous ones. Balancing ‘classical’ and ‘revisionist’ approaches also provides a more realistic assessment of Robert Moses himself. Moses was neither the existentialist hero emphasized in earlier accounts nor the unassuming facilitator prominent in later ones. Like any human being he had his own views, preconceptions, skills, and background influences that played a part in the decisions he made. Historians’ treatment of Moses as the personification of grassroots activism for instance downplays how atypical he really was for Mississippi’s grassroots realities. In an unconscious echo of the ‘outside agitator’ theme so beloved of white Southerners, Mississippi NAACP leader Aaron Henry emphasized this disconnect: “SNCC spokesmen, particularly Bob Moses, reasoned that as long as the upper and middle class held the wealth of the country, the poor people would never get their share. This thinking did not emerge from the cotton fields of Mississippi. These were theories brought into the state by various highly educated people.” By outlining Moses’ work with both local people and national organizations, this study throws fresh light on the leadership role that Moses actually played.<sup>46</sup>

## 1.5. Research Question

To uncover answers for these problems in civil rights movement historiography and the place of Moses and SNCC in it, the dissertation operates from the following primary research question: *What distinguished Moses’ understanding of organizational leadership and to what extent did his own leadership reflect these views in practice?* By treating Moses as a subject in his own right, this study aims to fill the gap in historical knowledge concerning his activities, leadership style, and legacy, making it the most detailed account of his activism to date. However, this is not a traditional biography. The objective is to analyze through Moses SNCC’s ideals and pragmatics (the process of facilitation in theory and practice). In this way the dissertation contributes to ‘classical’ accounts of SNCC by including what happened at the local level, and to ‘revisionist’ ones by assessing the relation between local activism to the national civil rights movement. This allows for addressing questions about the nature of movements, like: What constitutes a “movement”? Is it organizational presence or is something else needed? Who was “selected” or stepped forth to be a leader? Who are “local people”? If its definition is “ordinary people,” then what is “ordinary” and when does one cease to be it? When does “facilitation” become “influencing” and how relevant were internal shifts in SNCC (structure, ideology, membership) for the continuation of local movements?

## 1.6. Sources

The dissertation’s sources are threefold: secondary sources, primary sources, and oral history. Secondary sources consist of academic studies (books, articles, and dissertations) on SNCC and Moses, but also on civil rights in a broader spectrum. To provide a sense of how outsiders witnessed movement activism, contemporary newspaper articles are featured, while being aware, as Clayborne Carson warned,

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<sup>45</sup> Cha-Jua and Lang, “The ‘Long Movement’ as Vampire,” 277-280; Thornton, *Dividing Lines*, 85-86; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 149.

<sup>46</sup> Aaron Henry and Constance Curry, *Aaron Henry: The Fire Ever Burning* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2000), 201-202.

“that the civil rights groups may have influenced the news reporting by directing reporters’ attention to activities in which the group was involved and that the reporters themselves may have had difficulty assessing the nature of organizational involvement in protest activity.” These range from the sympathetic liberal white and black press—newspapers like the *New York Times* and magazines like *Jet* and *Saturday Evening Post*—to pro-segregationist papers such as the *McComb Enterprise-Journal* and the *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*.<sup>47</sup>

The primary sources can be divided into two groups. One consists of memoirs by former SNCC members, such as Moses, Lewis, Sellers, Forman, Carmichael, King, and others associated with the group. The latter include Freedom Summer volunteers like Sally Belfrage, but also members of other organizations, for example Aaron Henry. Included in this group are also transcripts of panel discussions held at SNCC reunions, like those captured by Cheryl Greenberg in *A Circle of Trust* or my own recordings of SNCC’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary conference in Raleigh, NC, during April 15-18, 2010.

Because oral history interviews have been recorded over a period of almost fifty years, they raise the question of reliability. Later interviews are likely to contain factual errors or memory lapses. Moreover, many movement veterans have obtained prominent positions in mainstream American life, in educational institutions, government agencies, and other organizations. They may therefore omit or downplay less pretty or more radical aspects of their activism. John Lewis, now a US Congressman, is a good example. He acknowledged to one interviewer that his “current legislative career is the outgrowth of his involvement in the movement, and the continuing trajectory of that career may precipitate shifts in his memory, interpretation, and evaluation.” Furthermore, SNCC has an active veteran community which still plays a dominant role in shaping history and conceptualizing the movement through conferences, books, and talks at schools and other venues. Interpretations of pivotal incidents in SNCC’s history, like the events in Albany or Atlantic City, accordingly have been repeated over and over, even by workers who were not present as they became part of a collective ‘SNCC identity.’<sup>48</sup>

Civil rights memoirs, Kathryn Nasstrom argued, therefore are but “selective reconstructions informed by present-day circumstances.” Those circumstances “include the existing scholarly and popular histories of the movement. These narratives act as a foil, or the touchstone, against which memory is drawn,” meaning that the authors’ “impulse to respond to existing narratives shapes and limits, in turn, what is recovered from memory.” Earlier movement accounts also “serve a productive role in autobiography as they authenticate and even generate memory,” with some activists quoting historians “to bolster [one’s] own interpretation.” Furthermore, Nasstrom asserted, “[c]ivil rights autobiographies... have often been a place to champion partisan positions and settle old scores.”<sup>49</sup>

To minimize these risks, great emphasis upon contemporaneous documentary sources is placed within this dissertation. The latter consists solely of material produced during the movement’s heyday, that is, the late 1950s to mid-1960s. Its principal source is the *Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers, 1959-1972*, which includes correspondence, project files, reports, and minutes of meetings. Other key sources are the personal papers of SNCC-workers or advisors—such as Ella Baker, Howard Zinn, Mendy Samstein, James Forman, Mary King, and others—and those of other organizations related to SNCC, like the NAACP, SCLC, CORE, and SDS. Government sources include correspondence, transcripts of President Johnson’s telephone conversations, and files from the Department of Justice and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). Another ‘official’ source consists of reports by the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission (MSSC), a state government agency created to spy on, and stymie, the civil rights movement. The MSSC files were released in 1998, but so far have been little used by civil rights scholars. The MSSC has several notable ‘investigative’ files on SNCC and Moses that provide valuable insight into their opponents’ state of mind.

<sup>47</sup> Carson, “Civil Rights Reform and the Black Freedom Struggle,” in *The Civil Rights Movement in America*, ed. Eagles, 29.

<sup>48</sup> Nasstrom, “Between Memory and History,” 325-364.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.



Oral history interviews provided a method of testing my own views and filling in gaps in my knowledge. Interviews with former SNCC-workers were conducted in person or via email. However, I generally accord greater weight to oral history interviews from contemporary times on the assumption that these memories would be fresher. Examples include Howard University's oral history collection recorded in the late 1960s, Anne Romaine's interviews with workers after Freedom Summer, and the 1965 Project South interviews conducted by Stanford University's KZSU radio station.

Another reason to use oral history is because Moses has kept his personal records private. While Eric Burner's claim that "even the most painstaking searching has uncovered no detailed archival evidence" on Moses' activism is an overstatement, it is true that much knowledge pertaining to his background (chapters 2-3) and evaluations of movement events are captured primarily in the rare interviews he granted to historians such as Clayborne Carson, Taylor Branch, William Chafe, and Charles Payne. These interviews, which are part of the public record but hardly used by historians, are the closest instruments available to getting at Moses' core. Added to these are my own interviews with Moses. I was grateful to have his cooperation, but it must be noted that this is an independent scholarly work and not a sanctioned biography. Nevertheless, wherever possible the emphasis will be on his words documented at the time.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 8.

## 2. One That Loves His Fellow Men

### 2.1. Growing Up in Harlem

Bob Moses' path into the 1960s civil rights movement was an unusual one. Compared to most SNCC-workers he came from an atypical background: while his political development had strong roots in the black community of his childhood, his exposure to the white world as an adolescent helped determine the accents of his later civil rights activism. Moses' story thereby complicates revisionist historians' emphasis on the resources of the African-American community rather than cosmopolitan ones—that is, a broad-based mixture of organic and multi-cultural influences—in explaining the relationship between the origins of ideas and subsequent activism of black civil rights leaders.

Two months after Moses was born in Harlem on January 23, 1935, a race riot erupted that left 3 dead and 200 injured and arrested. Although it started over a rumor that a white policeman had killed a black youth, *The New York Times* held the Depression's "many economic ills" accountable. The black *Amsterdam News* went further, blaming "the discrimination, exploitation and oppression of 204,000 American citizens in the most liberal city in America," New York.<sup>1</sup>

Since World War I Harlem had functioned as the so-called "mecca of the New Negro," an exciting place for cosmopolitan-minded and race-conscious blacks that attracted thousands of migrants and immigrants. By 1930 only 21.2 percent of Manhattan's blacks were born there. The rest were foreign-born or born elsewhere in the US, with nearly 50 percent coming from the South. Between 1916 and 1930, 1.6 million southern blacks moved North in what became known as the Great Migration. Another 5 million followed between 1940-1970, seeking their fortune in northern industrial jobs as their farms suffered from credit loss and natural disasters like flooding and the boll weevil, and racial antagonism worsened. For them, one historian said, moving North "represented a new strategy in the struggle for the full rights of American citizenship." After Booker T. Washington's death and much of his constituency's move northward, the focus of black leadership also shifted to the North. Particularly Harlem emerged as the political capital of black America, with its heavy concentration of black activists, including NAACP headquarters, Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, and A. Philip Randolph's union the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. Mass meetings and debates between black nationalists, Pan-Africanists, integrationists, and Communists were common sights on street corners. The center of a new black cultural 'renaissance' as well, Harlem's institutions such as jazz clubs, social, and literary organizations flourished too, drawing even a large white clientele.<sup>2</sup>

For Harlem's structure, however, this expansion was dramatic. As in most northern cities, historian Cheryl Greenberg revealed, housing segregation in New York "was built on a sturdy foundation of racial restrictions encoded in private regulations and public policy." Black Harlemites accordingly could not rent outside its edges. Landlords, *The New York Times* noted, then kept "Negro rents artificially high" within Harlem's perimeters. White storeowners did the same with food prices. Consequently, Greenberg said, adequate minimum incomes needed "to be higher than the required minimum elsewhere." It also brought "overcrowding, high death rates, [and] high crime." In his classic study, Gilbert Osofsky stated that in the 1920s Harlem "emerge[d] as a slum...with manifold social and economic problems called 'deplorable,'

<sup>1</sup> Rose C. Feld, "Harlem Riot Attributed to Many Economic Ills," *New York Times*, March 24, 1935; Marc Naisson, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 144-145.

<sup>2</sup> Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 1; Naisson, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression*, 32; James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 28-29, 37, 57; Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2009), 13.

‘unspeakable,’ and ‘incredible,’” but its internal divisions, based on class and nativity, prevented united protest. In the 1930s conditions worsened. According to historian Thomas Sugrue, “[w]renching poverty was inescapable in Depression-era Harlem.” Sixty percent of its population was unemployed and those with jobs faced severe salary cuts. Eventually, Greenberg agreed, “poverty and discrimination brought Harlem to the boiling point in 1935.”<sup>3</sup>

After the riot, the city government realized it needed to invest in the neighborhood. One of its moves was building four-story public housing projects, the Harlem River Houses. Their intention, *The New York Times* informed, was to “provide for families who, through no fault of their own, have been living in substandard conditions.” 574 black families out of 11,500 applicants could rent a small apartment at \$7 a room per month. The project had a nursery school, health clinic, and laundry facilities. The tenants chosen needed an average income of \$1,340 and mostly “comprise[d] unskilled and semi-skilled workers.” Among them were Bob Moses, his parents Gregory Hayes and Louise Parris Moses, his older brother, Gregory, and his younger brother, Roger.<sup>4</sup>

Moses’ family history was rooted in the Great Migration too. His grandfather, William Henry Moses, was a prominent southern Baptist preacher. He was educated at Virginia Seminary in Lynchburg and was the vice-president of the National Baptist Convention, then the nation’s third largest religious organization. He wrote homiletic reviews, held pastorates in the South, in Washington D.C., and Philadelphia, and was a one-term president of Guadalupe College for Baptist ministers in Texas. Virginia Seminary and Guadalupe College were strong black independent institutions founded to counter black moderates’ cooperation with white Baptists. The ancestry of his wife, Julia Trent, went back to a white plantation owner’s son, Peter Trent, from Cumberland, Virginia, and one of his slaves. The family eventually settled in New York, where grandfather Moses’ church did well. Consequently, Bob Moses related in 1983, his grandfather offered “to put [their six] kids through big schools.” According to Paul Harvey, students from black Baptist training institutions like William Moses represented a “talented tenth,” constituting a “mere fraction of the nearly eighteen thousand men who by 1910 claimed the ministry” for who “literacy was an achievement; higher training was simply out of the question.” Moses’ family can therefore be classified as upwardly striving middle class.<sup>5</sup>

Shortly after the move, however, William Moses fell ill, which deprived his younger children of financial support and higher education. One of those affected was Moses’ father, the fourth in line. To survive Gregory Moses accepted a blue-collar job at Harlem’s 369<sup>th</sup> Armory. Maintaining he got “short-changed,” he always looked enviously at his older brothers. One, William (Uncle Bill), graduated from Pennsylvania State College, had worked in New York as an architectural draftsman, designed buildings in Virginia, and since then taught courses at the state’s black Hampton Institute. Uncle Bill, Bob Moses said, was “the only one on either side of my immediate family living in the South.” Another brother, DeMaurice, was a Lieutenant Colonel who had led a black battalion in the Pacific during World War II. Afterwards he became commander of the 369<sup>th</sup> Armory where Gregory worked as a maintenance man.

<sup>3</sup> Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 13, 175, 202; “Negro Rents Held Artificially High,” *New York Times*, December 15, 1937; Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, *‘Or Does It Explode?’ Black Harlem in the Great Depression* (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 1991), 5, 14, 30-31, 44-45, 174; Osofsky quoted in Naisson, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression*, 23.

<sup>4</sup> “PWA Harlem Rent Set At \$7 A Room” and “11,500 Seek, 574 Get Model Apartments,” *New York Times*, March 31, 1937, and August 19, 1937; Greenberg, *‘Or Does It Explode?’* 184. Applicants numbers for the Harlem River Houses vary from 11,500 to 14,000 to 20,000 in different sources.

<sup>5</sup> Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 9, 226; Doris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 1, 1993, and Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 10, 1983, transcripts, Box 108, Folder 1, Taylor Branch Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill (hereafter cited as Doris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 1, 1993, Taylor Branch Papers, and Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 10, 1983, Taylor Branch Papers); Paul Harvey, *Redeeming the South: Religious Cultures and Racial Identities Among Southern Baptists, 1865–1925* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 69, 70, 182, 228.

Their three sisters were in show business, including the famous 1930s Broadway productions the Ziegfeld Follies.<sup>6</sup>

Gregory Moses had only completed high school. Before the Armory job he was unemployed and lived with his father. His wife, Moses' mother, was the daughter of a domestic worker in Queens, New York, and had only had two years of high school education. Moses recalled in 2011 that his "father did not want her to work when we were young," but "she talked often about a job she had at one time at 'Chock Full of Nuts,' the chain that Jackie Robinson helped to market in Negro neighborhoods. She was proud of how she managed her counter and her regular customers." Life accordingly was difficult for the Moses family, although the move to the public housing projects was considered an improvement in the black community. While having a steady job during the Depression made one part of the black middle class, Cheryl Greenberg wrote that even so, any "small change in fortune...could throw such a family into destitution."<sup>7</sup>

When the nation recovered through the wartime economic boom, blacks hardly profited. Whites worked in the blooming defense industries, but many of its jobs were closed to blacks. Of the 29,215 positions in New York war plants, blacks filled only 142. Neither could blacks access newly created higher-level positions or find work as quickly as whites. Simultaneously New York's black population rose 62 percent in the 1940s, with "the federal government's own research confirm[ing] high levels of Black frustration and anger over segregated conditions." *The Nation* verified that "the problems of the Negroes in Harlem have been increased rather than lightened by the war boom." In 1943 Harlem subsequently experienced another race riot. Being eight, Moses recounted in 2011, he "knew what was going on but didn't have a clue about what it meant." He only remembered "peering out [our] fourth floor living room window" with his mother and older brother, watching a "sea of young black boys" and not being able to "see the end of them as they flow with an unrelenting roar on the street" below.<sup>8</sup>

Throughout the forties the Moses family continued to live under "terrible strain." Like many Harlemites, it was forced to supplement its income. Moses, his mother, and brothers did this by selling milk from a co-operative in the housing projects before school, he related in 1982: "Every morning the co-op delivered two cartons...People would line up and we sold the milk for nineteen cents a quart. We kept one penny; the rest went to the co-op. If we sold both cartons we could pay for two quarts of milk for ourselves." This early encounter with self-help impressed him deeply. Harlem was filled with such examples, one historian wrote, as "black churches and black political and self-help organizations all sought to enlarge the boundaries that constrained Harlemites." The milk co-op was thus an instrument to combat poverty and Harlem's artificially high food prices, making it both an economic and political vehicle. The co-op experience gained in significance as Moses grew older: "It later made a very deep impression as I learned more about the whole process of setting up businesses and the problems of black people in getting started in the economy in this country," one of the issues SNCC got involved in.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 325; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 9-10; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Charles Payne, August 1993, in *Debating the Civil Rights Movement*, Stephen F. Lawson and Charles Payne, in *Debating the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1968* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 186; Dick Russell, *Black Genius and the American Experience* (New York: Carrol & Graf Publishers, 1998), 328; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 27; Doris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 1, 1993, and Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 10, 1983, Taylor Branch Papers; Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?* 90; Mentor A. Howe, "Come to the Fair!" *Phylon* 1, no. 4 (4<sup>th</sup> Quarter, 1940): 315;

<sup>7</sup> Greenberg, 'Or Does It Explode?' 9; Robert Parris Moses, email interview by author, March 10, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Greenberg, 'Or Does It Explode?' 200; Biondi, *To Stand and Fight*, 3, 10; Robert Parris Moses, email interview by author, March 10, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Doris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 1, 1993, Taylor Branch Papers; Greenberg, 'Or Does It Explode?' 10; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Clayborne Carson, March 29-30, 1982, transcript in author's possession (hereafter cited as Moses interview Carson, 1982); Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 32-33.

Harlem's black culture thus introduced Moses to a type of activism that stressed self-empowerment, but he did not adopt the language of its most well-known institution, the black church. While most historians emphasize the formative role of the black church in black activists' development, in Moses' case this is more complex: church did not play a traditional role in his early life, but he neither rejected his Baptist family background.

This reflected the general change southern blacks who had migrated North experienced over generations in their relationship with the black church. The black church, sociologist Gunnar Myrdal wrote in 1944, was founded as a deliberate means to assert blacks' freedom from slavery after the "almost complete and permanent" expulsion of blacks from southern white churches during the Civil War. Yet as circumstances for (southern) blacks changed, so did their relation to the black church. James Grossman discovered in his study of Chicago during the Great Migration that "many migrants felt distinctly uncomfortable" in northern black churches. Most denounced the southern rural way of holding services, with its 'theatrical' emotionalism, called "the Frenzy" by W.E.B. DuBois. Their own services were often more sober, and some congregants displayed "hostility...along lines of class and geographic origin" towards newcomers. Migrants then often left, "shopped around" for other churches, or started new ones.<sup>10</sup>

Likewise, Greenberg stated, two-thirds of Harlem churches "had fewer than a hundred members and met in store-fronts or private apartments." Almost half of Harlemites belonged to a congregation, but this membership rate was lower than elsewhere in the US. She therefore suggested "that in Harlem the churches faced competition from other urban organizations for the loyalty of the community." This mirrored the trend Myrdal detected that "[y]oung people have begun to look down on the old-fashioned Negro preacher" and rejected the church as "a conservative institution." Blacks also attended churches without becoming members. This indicates that many Harlem blacks, of which 50 percent had southern origins, found ways to practice religion without tying their convictions to a specific church or denomination. Practicing religion, like everything in the North, became a more fluid experience.<sup>11</sup>

Consequently, while Moses' grandfather lived for the church, his offspring related differently to it. Moses' parents were Baptists, with his father said to have read the Bible nightly. Yet they chose not to "push" institutionalized religion on their sons' lives. According to Moses' aunt Doris, they "were not a church-going family," although Moses attended Sunday School occasionally. In 2011 he clarified that "the most dedicated and devoted member of a black church was Grandma Johnson, my mother's mother," who lived in Jamaica, Long Island. She never "missed a Sunday, but neither my father nor mother did church at all." Simultaneously Moses said he was influenced by his Uncle Bill, who "told me how much it meant to him when he joined a small church in Hampton of Universalists whose practices and theology were, for him, a good fit."<sup>12</sup>

Moses thus had an unusual relationship with the traditional black church. He was always interested in what he would "loosely call spiritual notions" and is said to possess a "very spiritual center" grounded in a Zen-like belief in "universal balance." His Mississippi colleague Dave Dennis likewise maintained in 2010 that religious matters "always played an important role in Bob's life" although not in the conventional manner. This approach to religion allowed Moses to evade dogmatic denominational entanglements but be open to non-conventional forms of Christianity later in life. Simultaneously, the

<sup>10</sup> Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy. Volume II* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1996), 862; Harvey, *Redeeming the South*, 46, 123, 214; Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 157-160.

<sup>11</sup> Greenberg, Cheryl. "Or Does It Explode?" Page 58, 103; Gunnar, *An American Dilemma-Volume II*, 863, 875, 877; James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (Minneapolis: Seabury Press, 1969), 108.

<sup>12</sup> Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 12-13; Doris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 1, 1993, Taylor Branch Papers; Moses interview Carson, 1982; Robert Parris Moses, email interview by author, March 10, 2011; U.S. Department of Justice, Southern District of New York, "Resume of the Inquiry Conscientious Objector Robert Parris Moses," March 21, 1962, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, University of Southern Mississippi, Jackson. Moses attended Sunday School at St. Mark's United Methodist Church at 138<sup>th</sup> Street and St. Nicholas Avenue.

traditional church likely found him through his Grandma, friends, or neighbors, even if *he* was not looking for *it*. According to Thomas Sugrue, in northern cities the “most vital institutions” were the churches, both Christian and black Muslim, which “often served as social service organizations, providing food [and] job training.” Although Harlem’s store-front churches, two-third of the total, do not fill this classification, Moses likely knew enough of the workings of the traditional black church and its potential to relate to the many religious participants of the 1960s southern civil rights movement.<sup>13</sup>

Rather than on biblical doctrine, Moses based the hallmarks of his later activist philosophy—agency, ownership in learning, grassroots leadership, the inherent worth of each man, self-determination, careful listening, and an identification with the working class—by watching those around him. Uncle Bill, for example, headed the NAACP in Hampton, Virginia. In the 1930s he played in an integrated theater production but refused to accept lower wages than his white co-workers, and during the war he organized a petition for integration of the armed forces which he sent to President Roosevelt. Moses also mentioned other family members’ consciousness-raising example: “In [my grandmother’s] kitchen there was always this running conversation about the state of the country. Even when my aunts talked about big names like Lena Horne or Duke Ellington whom they had worked with, [it] was really political dialogue about other Black talent they knew who were unable to emerge. Their discussions were like one long discussion on the larger issue of race. Inevitably they would turn to me. ‘You’re going to be whatever you want to be.’”<sup>14</sup>

Above all, Moses got these hallmarks from observing his father, with whom he was close. While Gregory Moses’ Armory post was considered “a good job,” he derived little satisfaction from it. Nothing more than a “glorified title” for a janitor, his main activities included operating switchboards and cleaning up snow. Like him, fifty percent of Harlem blacks worked in the service sector, but those were generally jobs that “didn’t *go* anywhere,” and so, Moses said in 1993, “he had worked there all the while we were growing up and was still there.” Gregory’s frustrations grew when his successful brother became the Armory’s commander, which, Moses disclosed, “ate at him.” His father, however, “never expressed [such personal issues] in terms of frustration at society as a whole.” Instead he became an alcoholic. Moses’ neighborhood friend Alvin Poussaint recalled that “Bob never talked about his father’s drinking” but “did not try to hide the fact.” Gunnar Myrdal documented in 1944 that alcoholism was a common problem in the black community, which he related to blacks’ overall substandard social conditions compared to whites: “The poverty of Negroes in both South and North...would seem to be behind [blacks’] greater indulgence of alcohol.” Like Gregory, however, he noted that most Americans nonetheless generally considered hardship “to be a personal failure, not a failure in the system.”<sup>15</sup>

His father’s frustrations and alcoholism affected everyone in the family, Moses related in 1993: “That really gave a turn to his life and to his family. It was hard, it was hard on my mother...What it means is that we can’t count on him.” His mother at least once suffered a minor breakdown as a result. In his memoir SNCC-worker Cleveland Sellers paraphrased how Moses recounted the experience in 1964: “She got sick once because we were poor and there was a lot of strain and tension in our home...My father took me with him when he went to see her [in Bellevue Hospital]. He asked the doctors what was wrong with her and they said she was crazy. My father became very angry and started to scream...‘She’s not crazy!

<sup>13</sup> Dave Dennis, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 17, 2010; Peggy Quinn, personal conversation with author, Raleigh, NC, April 17, 2010; Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 262.

<sup>14</sup> Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 19, 228; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 40.

<sup>15</sup> Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 10; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Charles Payne, August 1993, in *Debating the Civil Rights Movement*, Lawson and Payne, 184-186; Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 99; Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987), 170; Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?* 91; Naisson, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression*, 32; Greenberg, *‘Or Does It Explode?’* 63; Alvin Poussaint, email interview by author, October 2010; Myrdal, *An American Dilemma-Volume II*, 980.

She's not crazy!...You're the ones who're crazy!" Undoubtedly, this was a traumatic experience for the Moses children.<sup>16</sup>

To prevent their sons from the same fate, Moses said his parents then "scrimped and saved to ensure that my brothers and I would get ahead." His father deliberately included his sons in his social encounters with the people in his personal network, such as family members, associates of Uncle Bill, and colleagues. Young Moses loved these meetings: "I liked hanging out with my father[,] listening to adult conversations," by which he was coincidentally "teaching me how to listen." For Moses these exchanges were eye-openers because "it's not just gossip talk. [They're] talking about issues of the day...related to the job and how it is that you can't really somehow make this job work." Gregory analyzed these discussions with Moses afterwards, asking pointed questions, such as "[W]hat does this mean for the little guy? How does this translate out?" or "So-and-so said this because..." and so on. He thereby demonstrated that although one lacked an education, one could nonetheless be politically perceptive. He was thus the first to show Moses the inherent ability in every man to reflect on one's position and hence determine one's best interest—a position Moses always maintained for Mississippi's rural black poor.<sup>17</sup>

Gregory's lessons went further, Moses said: "[What] really help[ed] me later on, [is he was] always pointing out to me about the person that we just talked to...what they are, what's real about them... He [was] teaching me how to read people." In this, Gregory showed Moses basic egalitarian ideals and the integrity of ordinary human beings: "[My father] had this great capacity to deal with the person...in front of him and sort of see through the various kinds of stereotypes. [He was] willing to look for and respond to [the] human qualities of that person, so he [was] not predisposed to try to put that person down." As a result, his father "taught me to look through the lenses of the 'common person' at the life all around me." Moses' later identification with the Mississippi lower-class can be attributed to this as well: "[My father looked] at life from these different perspectives, so he [was] here at the bottom, but there [were] also people who are closely connected with him who [had] these connections at higher levels, so this [idea of] looking at the environment in Harlem and the structure...from the point of view of the man in the street... affected my whole interest in, attraction to working [at the] grassroots." But Moses' *modus operandi* in Mississippi also reflected his father's limitations: "[W]hat is lacking in my father is this exposure to a sustained struggle which has involved a large network of people...[H]e never got a chance to...turn his own personal struggles into this larger struggle." As an organizer Moses therefore made 'exposure,' 'education,' and 'connecting up with' key components.<sup>18</sup>

Moses of course did not develop this sophisticated analysis of his father, American society, race, and individual agency until later in life. He was still a child who tried to make rudimentary sense of society through his surroundings. What he saw most was his father, who had "sacrificed his talents for the sake of his family." Even Uncle Bill had faced the constraints of black professional success: he designed the award-winning Virginia Pavilion for the 1939 World Fair in an anonymous competition. When the Virginia World Fair's Commission discovered its architect was black, however, it denied him his award and employed a white one. According to one academic, this created "a furor...particularly in Negro Virginia." The white *Virginian Pilot* even apologized to its readers for having announced the winner on its front page and having addressed him as "Mister," because it had not had a "clue to [the contestants'] racial identities." Moses remembered the incident "followed [Bill] for the rest of his life." Afterwards he spent "a few days with

<sup>16</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by Charles Payne, August 1993, in *Debating the Civil Rights Movement*, Lawson and Payne, 184-186; Doris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 1, 1993, Taylor Branch Papers; Sellers and Terrell, *The River of No Return*, 138.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by Charles Payne, August 1993, in *Debating the Civil Rights Movement*, Lawson and Payne, 184-186; Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?* 90-1; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 40; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 234.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by Charles Payne, August 1993, in *Debating the Civil Rights Movement*, Lawson and Payne, 183-4, 186; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 234; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 40, 223.



us...they cooked food and drank whiskey for days explaining to each other and to [me,] a five-year-old[,] what had taken place and what it all meant.” Moses eventually concluded his family’s misfortune stood not by itself: “There was a lot of that middle-class frustration—a whole generation of people who were intelligent, rooted in family, and industrious, for who there was just no opportunity. You’d always hear, ‘It’s gonna be different when *you* grow up.’ So you had a slow buildup of frustration,” which became Moses’ own as well.<sup>19</sup>

To counter this, his father stressed the value of education: “I lost my chance at college because of the Depression. You’ll have a better chance [and] you have to take it.” This was an overall characteristic of the 1940s’ black middle class, Gunnar Myrdal argued: “Education has a high ranking in their scale of social values, and they want to give their children this means of fuller cultural emancipation.” In New York, however, the construction of segregated schools had been legal until 1938, and those in existence remained standing. Such schools were inferior to white ones on all levels. PS 90, the black elementary school Moses attended, was in Harlem’s center. This severely impacted his educational experience. As Thomas Sugrue noted, by “every measure—teacher turnover, physical plant, student test scores—Harlem’s schools were among the worst in the city.” The 1930s local Teacher Union was even “shocked by the physically deteriorated conditions of the Harlem schools and the contempt for the capacities of black children expressed [by] teachers and administrators.” Black students were simply expected to attend vocational school afterwards, Moses lamented in 1964: “[T]here was usually no effort...to prepare people for [advancement] tests and encourage them to take it.” This systematic attitude was disastrous for black students’ confidence. It was not apathy that prevented them from taking such tests, Moses described his classmates, but “they’d have the feeling it was something out of their range.”<sup>20</sup>

According to Aunt Doris, school accordingly was “awful” for Moses, although he loved learning. In 2011 he attributed this love to his mother, an avid reader. Every Friday evening she took him to the library. His best memories include sitting “in the living room on cold winter evenings with my mother, each of us into a book from the library.” Noting this, some teachers then gave him extra assignments. One in particular, Mrs. Stuart, stimulated Moses’ thinking. She translated Harlem’s popular political manifestations of the day, emphasizing black nationalism and self-empowerment, to her class by making them recite James Henry Leigh Hunt’s poem *Abou Ben Adhem* each day. It was “the only poem,” Moses said, “I’ve ever learned and still know”:

Abou Ben Adhem (may his tribe increase!)  
Awoke one night from a deep dream of peace,  
And saw (...) an angel writing in a book of gold.  
Exceeding peace had made Ben Adhem bold,  
And to the Presence in the room he said  
“What writest thou?”—The vision raised its head,  
And (...) answered “The names of those who love the Lord.”  
“And is mine one?” said Abou. “Nay, not so,”  
Replied the angel. Abou spoke more low,  
But cheerly still, and said “I pray thee, then,  
Write me [down] as one that loves his fellow men.”

<sup>19</sup> Handwritten notes Taylor Branch, 16 January 1999, Box 108, Folder 1, Taylor Branch Papers; Dittmer, *Local People*, 457n; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 10; Howe, “Come to the Fair!” 314-317.

<sup>20</sup> Russell, *Black Genius and the American Experience*, 328; Myrdal, *An American Dilemma-Volume II*, 704; Naisson, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression*, 214; Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 164, 188; Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?* 89.



The angel wrote, and vanished. The next night  
 It came again with a great waking light,  
 And showed the names whom love of God had blessed,  
 And lo! Ben Adhem's name led all the rest.

The poem's vision attracted Moses deeply: it was "the biggest expression of black consciousness, on the part of Mrs. Stuart, who wanted her students to have a very deep value that was spiritual, but was related to the idea of working for and with your people...it's not an expression of overt nationalism, but in the context of PS-90 and Harlem, it's a message."<sup>21</sup>

To this idea of non-institutional spirituality, with its pragmatic and humanistic though non-atheist bend, Moses felt closest throughout his life. The poem, however, was easily compatible with the interpretation of Christianity that a new generation of southern black ministers, such as Martin Luther King, James Lawson, and John Lewis, in the 1950s and 1960s held. In order to survive white control, theologian James Cone observed, most southern black ministers since the Civil War had in their services "[minimized] injustices in the present in favor of a Kingdom beyond this world." This earned many "a reputation as [Uncle] Toms who played the part of the 'loyal Negro' to local whites." Yet, Paul Harvey asserted in his study, such ministers combined the practice of cooperation with ideologies of individual uplift. Accordingly, "to condemn the black church for not staging a revolution in the Jim Crow South is to overlook its role in holding people together during a period when sheer survival was an achievement." Nonetheless, since Reconstruction several (mostly urban) ministers, like Sutton Griggs, Richard Henry Boyd, and Vernon Johns, had mixed evangelicalism with political activity. Their numbers had steadily increased, Myrdal detected in 1944: "Negro preachers [are more] active in the work for protest and betterment." This new generation followed the so-called "social gospel," which John Lewis defined as "taking the teachings of the Bible and applying them to the earthbound problems [confronting] society." This echoed the poem's connection of spiritual salvation to uplifting one's people, as earlier also expressed by laymen such as Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois.<sup>22</sup>

Despite his teachers' help, however, the disparity with white children his age remained. This was not uncommon for black students, Thomas Sugrue discovered: "In northern states, blacks were one to two years behind whites...Even those with comparable educational levels...were not on the same educational playing field because of the disadvantages of separate and unequal northern schools." This gave Moses a lifelong sense of insecurity about his academic capabilities, although he eventually became an intellectual in every sense of the word. In 1948 his hard work paid off: a high score on a citywide examination he had taken when he was eleven allowed him to attend the exclusive Peter Stuyvesant High School, like his brother Gregory a year earlier. There he learned to translate the elements of Harlem's black culture—humanism, self-help, class, and spirituality—into a more concrete political vision. His transition to Stuyvesant, however, also introduced him to a new, cosmopolitan world full of whites.<sup>23</sup>

## 2.2. Passing Through the White World

When Moses entered Stuyvesant, a public school for gifted children in lower-Manhattan, the repressive Cold War climate of the 1950s had already begun to manifest itself. Fear of nuclear war and the 'red scare' rose with the arms race between East and West. Through Joseph McCarthy's witch hunt and

<sup>21</sup> Doris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 1, 1993, Taylor Branch Papers; Robert Parris Moses, email interview by author, March 10, 2011; Hayes, 'I Used the Term 'Negro' and I Was Firmly Corrected,' 160-161. The teacher's name could also be spelled 'Mrs. Stewart.' The poem is sometimes called *Abu Ben Adhem* as well.

<sup>22</sup> Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 105; Harvey, *Redeeming the South*, 134, 179; Myrdal, *An American Dilemma-Volume II*, 877; Lewis and D'Orso, *Walking with the Wind*, 45.

<sup>23</sup> Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 258.

the House of Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), so did fear of a Communist takeover. Casualties became Old Left organizations and individuals with existing or non-existing ties to alleged or acknowledged Communist groups. They were isolated, transformed, or eliminated completely like the National Negro Labor Council or the Southern Conference for Human Welfare. Censorship ruled, historian Martha Biondi said: “[L]abor leaders, community activists[,] politicians, [and] Black artists [were pressured] to move away from radical affiliations, discourses, and worldviews” through “blacklisting, death threats, and congressional subpoenas.”<sup>24</sup>

New York’s Manhattan, however, tried to maintain a stronghold against the new *Zeitgeist*. Its Greenwich Village embodied the U.S.’s largest bohemian ferment of that time. Advocates of the Old Left still lingered there, although even in New York McCarthyism was rampant. According to Biondi, especially “the New York City public school system had become an epicenter of local McCarthyism...Fifty teachers were dismissed and nearly four hundred resigned rather than face the prospect of naming names.” But Stuyvesant High School was home to many students of left-leaning parents and openly endorsed liberal activism. Reminiscent of John Dewey’s ideals of progressive education, from its inception in 1904 Stuyvesant had seen its function as “the poor man’s opportunity to give his children a liberalizing education” because “they are the educational hope of democracy.” In the postwar era, democracy obtained special meaning, the 1952 *Indicator*, the school’s yearbook, stated: “[O]ur strength, based on the democratic virtues, is of such profound force and truth that it has rejuvenated those...battered by totalitarianism.” It urged its graduates to be “practitioners, innovators, and missionaries of this great tradition...You are morally obligated to [carry] on this way of life, enriching it and expanding its meaning and practices.”<sup>25</sup>

When Moses attended Stuyvesant between 1948 and 1952, it was still an all-boys school, renowned for its excellence in mathematics and science education combined with manual training. Its alumni include Thelonius Monk, Attorney General Eric Holder, civil rights activist Roy Innis, and four Nobel laureates. It accepted a high number of immigrant children, Asians, Jews, and, uncommon in those days, African-Americans, although Moses noted in 1964 that out “a few thousand, not more than a handful were Negroes.” His yearbook counts approximately 23 blacks out of 758 graduating class students. He nonetheless enthusiastically participated in all that Stuyvesant offered. Although his Harlem friend and now fellow Stuyvesant-student Alvin Poussaint noted that Moses had “always been self-effacing, quiet, and avoid[ing] the public spotlight,” he was elected class president in his senior year. He also joined the basketball and track team, which earned him a Public School’s Athletic League Award.<sup>26</sup>

Moses nevertheless spent most time with his Harlem playmates. From 1950 he and Poussaint shared a job at the New York University Medical Library. This, Poussaint recalled in 2010, “kept us in close contact to exchange ideas and stay socially connected” as they loved sharing their maturing views on society. The frustrating racial and class realities at Stuyvesant played a role in this too. Moses’ closest associates were his brother and Poussaint, since, the latter said, “it was understood at that time that socializing interracially was generally not acceptable” outside school hours. Poussaint was rejected for the Honor Society without reason despite being elected and he felt chastised for his distinct East Harlem enunciation. Both Moses and Poussaint recalled that despite their good marks, the school “advisor steered the few black students at Stuyvesant toward black schools and away from white ones” when college representatives came around. Moses said they “were incensed” about it, but neither dared to confront the advisor.

<sup>24</sup> Mary Beth Norton, et al., eds., *A People and a Nation: A History of The United States* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999), 534, 536, 539-544; Biondi, *To Stand and Fight*, 175.

<sup>25</sup> Biondi, *To Stand and Fight*, 173; *Indicator*, Yearbook 1952, Archives Stuyvesant Alumni Association, New York City; Susan E. Meyer, *Stuyvesant High School: The First 100 Years* (New York: The Campaign for Stuyvesant/Alumni(ae) & Friends Endowment Fund, 2005), 10-17.

<sup>26</sup> Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?* 89; Meyer, *Stuyvesant High School*, 10-17; Harold Zuckerman, “Dedication,” *Indicator*, 1952.

Poussaint nonetheless claimed that “juggling Harlem and Stuyvesant for me and Bob did not seem difficult.” After school they returned to Harlem “where we did not feel like outsiders.”<sup>27</sup>

These ambivalent encounters with white liberalism spurred Moses’ openness to more left-leaning perspectives. Moses, Poussaint said, “was an idealist, even at Stuyvesant” and was “very politically aware [and] identified with groups that [fought] oppression and would talk about racial issues, socialism, and the shortcomings of capitalism.” Through Poussaint Moses also experienced his “first real introduction to leftist politics,” because Poussaint’s father, a black printer, survived through supporters and customers who “were on the left of the political spectrum.” During winter, Moses, his brother Gregory, Poussaint, and his sister Julie regularly went to hootenannies, or folk music parties, where Pete Seeger and other radical folk singers played. Moses even met Seeger, then still a member of the Communist Party, at a friend’s apartment in Greenwich Village. In 1982 he confirmed that these experiences “helped orient” him politically. Seeger also “had a lot of impact” for another reason: “Seeger was always talking about the South.”<sup>28</sup>

For Moses this was a time of learning that added to his father’s insights. Aunt Doris said her nephew “as a kid was restless” and in a “general mix-up of trying to understand what life was all about,” although he felt “that too much was made of social status” and “thought he was as good as” anyone. But the actions of his peers provided further direction. For instance, he recalled in 1982, a decisive moment came when his brother Gregory and Poussaint attended summer camps “run by left wing leaning trade unionists” who supported “left wing causes, from liberal groups through socialists and communists.” By 1956 there were 27 of such camps in New York State. Moses only went once, but Gregory and Poussaint became camp counselors. The “tone and politics” of the camps, Moses said, “was radical,” with mostly children of leftist parents and Jews active in organizations that fought segregation attending. The Communist Party’s newspaper, *The Daily Worker*, was readily available and Paul Robeson, then blacklisted for his communist-leaning beliefs, sang to the campers, one tenth of whom were black. Folk dances and songs celebrating socialism and the Soviet and Chinese Revolutions were taught. The camps were attractive, Poussaint stated, “to me and the Moses brothers because they promoted interracial interactions...We considered these white people to be progressive and admired them. Their cause was not a popular one even in New York”—a claim supported by a *New York Times* report of a cross burning at one such camp in New Jersey in 1948. It were also whites from these camps with whom the boys attended the hootenannies; not with their supposed ‘liberal’ classmates.<sup>29</sup>

At the camp Moses was “exposed to some of the Young Socialists” and other radical-minded student groups, although it is unclear to what degree distinctions between the Old Left groups entered his formative process. He mainly recalled discussions among these groups that included lynching and the Dixiecrats, the Southern pro-segregationist members of the Democratic Party: “[W]e all talked about that and the obstacle they were to legislation, the theme being that the Democratic Party needed to be purged” of them. Apart from raising his awareness of race problems, these Old Leftist-related encounters also sensitized him to issues of ‘red baiting.’ He knew “these notorious so-called left-wingers” and people like his brother and Poussaint to be just that, “people”—not Soviet Union controlled puppets. As a civil

<sup>27</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 10, 1983, Taylor Branch Papers; Alvin Poussaint, email interview by author, October 2010.

<sup>28</sup> Seth Cagin and Philip Dray, *We Are Not Afraid: The Story of Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney, and the Civil Rights Campaign for Mississippi* (New York: Nation Books, 2006), 87; Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker & The Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 251; Moses interview Carson, 1982; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 11, 1983, transcript, Box 108, Folder 1, Taylor Branch Papers; Alvin Poussaint, email interview by author, October 2010.

<sup>29</sup> Moses interview Carson, 1982; Doris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 1, 1993, and Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 11, 1983, Taylor Branch Papers; Alvin Poussaint, email interview by author, October 2010; “Fiery Cross in Jersey: Crude Warning to Communists Burns on Resort Grounds,” *New York Times*, August 14, 1948; Abigail A. Van Slyck, “Summer Camps,” Gale Group, entry posted 2008, <http://www.faqs.org/childhood/So-Th/Summer-Camps.html> (accessed December 19, 2009).

rights leader, he conversely refused to let past or even present Communist-affiliations disqualify movement participants.<sup>30</sup>

In this sense, Moses' teenage encounters with the Old Left represent a sense of continuity with the 1960s New Left. The latter was characterized by its break with this self-restraining mentality regarding cooperation with alleged Communists, although it rejected Marxism. Moses has generally been viewed as one of its defining faces; Staughton Lynd even claimed him as "the most respected, even revered, leader" in the New Left. Moses, however, always rejected the New Left label. As he explained in 2009: "I [never] really consider[ed] myself part of the New Left. That was a term I saw [first] in *Newsweek*...They had a kind of mixed metaphor on the cover [that] said, 'In Orbit on the Left.' And the idea that you were orbiting in some kind of elliptical fashion like a planet but that you were orbiting on the Left struck me as not really that useful." Moreover, he defined the 'New Left' as consisting of white liberal groups like Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and black nationalists after 1965, when Moses had already left SNCC. Yet in his activism Moses and currents of the New Left flowed interminably through one another. So did further connections to and breaks with the Old Left, although he never joined any Old Left groups. What is striking from Moses' answer then is not whether or not he fitted conceptions of the New Left, but that he did not recognize himself in the image others held of him—a recurrent issue in Moses' life.<sup>31</sup>

In 1952 Moses graduated from Stuyvesant. Wanting to continue his studies, his parents encouraged him to select a white liberal arts college instead of a traditional black one, most of which were located in the South and considered inferior. They settled on Hamilton College in Clinton, New York, to which he won a scholarship. Moses' time at this second academically exclusive school played another formative role in his transition into a fulltime organizer. It strengthened his race consciousness, showed him models of groups working for social change, taught him to work within *and* criticize (white) liberal institutions, and helped solidify the intellectual basis of his future leadership style. What is additionally striking about this time is the inherent contradiction in his silent personality and his clear enjoyment in engaging in social activities, especially in an organized structure. He evidently sought extended family networks of like-minded people and in these activities found comfort even if he was the only black person there. This foreshadowed what he looked for in SNCC when he finally joined the movement in 1960.<sup>32</sup>

Academically, Moses and Hamilton were a perfect match. Its scholastic environment was demanding. Hamilton annually accepted 175 of 1,000 applications and classes were mandatory, including on Saturdays. Moses ably handled the workload, including extracurricular activities, such as the Honor Court, vice presidency of his senior class, head of the student advisors to freshmen, and the Choir, which often toured the region with sacred and secular songs. He received a \$900 Rhodes Scholarship and for three years earned an additional \$200 by working as a waiter in the non-fraternity dining hall. Until 1954 he also continued his job at the NYU Medical Library. Athletically he excelled as well; he joined baseball and became captain of the basketball team in 1955-1956, which, according to *The Hamilton Alumni Review*, "chalked up the most wins in Hamilton history" that season. The yearbook praised his "playmaking techniques and his stabilizing influence on the team." All the while he retained an 85 percent average, graduating in the upper quarter of his class with departmental honors in his favorite subject, philosophy, in 1956.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Moses interview Carson, 1982; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 11, 1983, Taylor Branch Papers; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 10; Cagin and Dray, *We Are Not Afraid*, 87.

<sup>31</sup> John C. Hammerback and Richard J. Jensen, "Working in Quiet Places: The Community Organizing Rhetoric of Robert Parris Moses," *Howard Journal of Communications* 11, no. 1 (2000): 3; John C. Hammerback and Richard J. Jensen, "'Your Tools Are Really The People': The Rhetoric of Robert Parris Moses," *Communications Monograph* 65, no. 2 (June 1998): 127; Ben Agger, *The Sixties At 40: Leaders and Activist Remember & Look Forward* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2009), 182-183, 187-188.

<sup>32</sup> Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 11; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 325; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 10, 1983, Taylor Branch Papers.

<sup>33</sup> Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 11-12, 14; U.S. Department of Justice, "Resume of the Inquiry Conscientious

Moses had discovered philosophy in high school, when he read Chinese philosopher Lao-Tse. At Hamilton he studied other Eastern philosophers and became attracted to thinkers like Ludwig Wittgenstein, a language purist like Moses. His favorites became the French existentialists, whom he read in French. One of his professors, Francis Tafoya, introduced him to Albert Camus, whose philosophies influenced Moses deeply. In SNCC he referred regularly to Camus, reread his work in jail, and carried a dog-eared copy of *The Rebel* in his pocket.<sup>34</sup>

The teaching of existentialism at Hamilton was not accidental. The philosophy was popular in academic settings, particularly Camus. Existentialism had its roots in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe but flourished between the 20<sup>th</sup> century wars and even became fashionable after World War II. Its disciples stressed the merit of individual existence and morality, although they differed in how one could give meaning to one's life and God's role in it (Friedrich Nietzsche claimed that "God is dead" while Paul Tillich, Søren Kierkegaard, and others kept their faith). French-Algerian Camus opposed nihilism, maintaining that the value of life asserted itself through one's actions if not through anything else. He demonstrated this through his own activism, which included joining the French Resistance during the war. This weight on following one's conscience as a means to personal freedom and on leading by one's life example profoundly attracted Moses.<sup>35</sup>

A remarkable number of student activists in the civil rights movement, especially Northern whites, acknowledge Camus as a motivational source for their involvement. Not having grown up in a southern black church tradition, they tried to find a way of linking the movement's social gospel concepts to their own upbringing, as one illustrated: "I got involved [with French existentialism and] intellectually that had something to do with [my involvement]—the two ideas, the one that a man is defined by his acts not his words, and two, that it's not a question so much of what you accomplish as that you are doing something—the Camus idea from *Sisyphus*." SNCC-workers Mary King, Casey Hayden, Jack Chatfield, and others also cited Camus as a source that broadened their thinking. King recalled that by 1963 she was, like her friend Moses, obsessed with Camus' dilemma of moral purity in connection to political effectiveness. Seizing upon this romantic image of the students, *New York Times*' journalist Gene Roberts even characterized SNCC as a group in which "it was a must that you be able to quote Camus."<sup>36</sup>

This statement, however, is exaggerated considering the many other influences that circulated in SNCC, including Frantz Fanon, Malcolm X, and the Bible, which, SNCC-historian Emily Stoper argued, made SNCC "an anti-ideological organization in every sense." The influence of the existentialists was in fact limited: "Only a small group within SNCC was even aware of the writings of Camus. Other SNCC members became familiar with these ideas mainly second-hand from this group." Undoubtedly, Moses had a major role in this with his habitual Camus quotations. Stokely Carmichael even changed his "major to philosophy. Bob's example of clarity and rationality influenced me in that decision...I remember one night in a Freedom House we sat up almost till sunup discussing a tough philosophical problem. That was Bob."<sup>37</sup>

Whereas Moses' frequent Camus references worried Southern segregationists—one noted anxiously that a Mississippi black arrested for civil rights activism carried a copy of Sartre's *Nausea* that had 'property of Bob Moses' written inside, implying that outside intellectuals were stirring up native blacks with 'foreign' ideas—it enthralled white liberal students and reporters who had mostly had a similar aca-

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Objector Robert Parris Moses," March 21, 1962; *Hamilton Alumni Review* 21 (1956): 125, and *The Hamiltonian*, Yearbook 1953, 1954, 1955, 1956, Archives Hamilton College Library, Clinton, New York.

<sup>34</sup> Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 325-326. Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 10, 1983, Taylor Branch Papers; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 15.

<sup>35</sup> John P. McKay et al., *A History of Western Society* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008), 916-917.

<sup>36</sup> Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 5, 213; Anonymous White Male, interview by KZSU Radio Station Stanford University, 1965, transcript, KZSU Project South Interview Collection, Microfiche 2479 (E), Library of Congress; King, *Freedom Song*, 110, 162; Greenberg, ed., *A Circle of Trust*, x; Agger, *The Sixties At 40*, 92.

<sup>37</sup> Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 117; Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 310-311.

demic training. By regularly mentioning Moses' connection to Camus, these writers sought him out as a black leader with whom they could identify and claim as 'one of their own.' They did the same with Martin Luther King, who quoted Georg Hegel and other (white) philosophers and theologians. This raises revealing questions about how they viewed the student movement, the extent of knowledge they had about activism in the black community and its players, and how they wanted to translate it to a national audience. After all, they generally focused on northern intellectuals who went South, like Moses, James Forman, and Charles McDew, or southern leaders partly educated in the North, like King. They did this at the expense of southern (religious) activists who bore the marks of inferior Jim Crow education in the language they used and evoked, such as John Lewis, Charles Sherrod, or Fred Shuttlesworth.<sup>38</sup>

In a sense, this was a distortion of the movement's historic reality, but it allowed white liberal observers to use the assets of people like Moses and King to generate support for the movement. Moses' educational background, language, and passionate character formed an appealing interface between the student movement and a sympathetic national (white) audience. His emphasis on Camus helped as well. First, Camus was regarded as a romantic figure and accordingly was widely read by white liberals. Second, Camus advocated humanism, which aligned with white liberal politics. Third, he represented individualism and, as such, was not rooted in socialist theories, despite his brief flirtation with the Communist Party. This allowed white liberals to distinguish people like Moses who quoted Camus from the Old Marxist Left. Seeing themselves as part of the New Left, these liberals found it convenient to define Moses and others in the student movement as dogma-free, so they were not strangled by Communist-allegations like the Old Left had been. Camus could thus be used as a tool to underscore a perceived sense of discontinuity with previous activism that could meet approval from a broader audience.

In Camus, Moses also found practical answers that corresponded with how he remembered his father's teachings. Like Gregory Moses, Camus emphasized awareness as a virtue because "only by doing so could individuals decide for themselves what choices to make." Moreover, Gregory had shown that every man could reflect sensibly on one's own position. By maintaining that "freedom was already within" each individual, Camus similarly affirmed the validity of individual agency and self-empowerment. By extension this justified "bottom-up" leadership. If individual agency were an end in its own right instead of a tool to a larger objective, then decisions ought to be made democratically, Stoper explained: "Unless all men are sacred and are therefore ends in themselves, no man can claim the right to be treated as sacred. [Therefore] in every community each man must be a full participant in making all the decisions that can affect his life. Otherwise, the community [treats] him as less than an end in himself." Consequently, Camus "urged a politics of small communities, where free individuals could discover their full selves and one another." Moses' identification with these principles allowed him to relate easily to the SNCC-workers, who had chosen a similar organizational leadership model. Nonetheless, Stoper correctly claimed, it "was not... Camus that made SNCC value small, democratic groups; it was its own experience both internally and in relation to other organizations."<sup>39</sup>

In collective struggles for social change Camus stressed moral purity and a rational means for rebellion that salvaged individual integrity. He argued in *The Rebel* (1951) that historically, initiators of rebellion in trying to affirm their individual dignity in the face of those that deny his existence inevitably degraded the dignity of others through violence: "[T]he rebel rebelled in the name of the identity of man with man but sacrifices this identity by consecrating the difference in blood." Or: the victims became executioners. To maintain moral purity one therefore should avoid being either one. This became Moses' credo too, he stated in 1964: "[My philosophy] goes back to when I was in college [when] I read a lot of Camus...The main essence of what he says is what I [feel] closest to...[He] comes out with something which I

<sup>38</sup> Cagin and Dray, *We Are Not Afraid*, 147; Payne, *I've Got The Light of Freedom*, 401-402.

<sup>39</sup> Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 117.



think is relevant in this struggle [for racial equality]. It's not a question that you just subjugate yourself to the conditions that are and don't try to change them. The problem is to go on from there, into something which is active, and yet the dichotomy is whether you can cease to be a victim anymore and also not be what he calls an executioner," that is, moving "Negro people from the place where they are now the victims of this kind of hatred, to a place where they don't in turn perpetuate this hatred."<sup>40</sup>

Moses' activist career fittingly became an experimental exercise in living up to these beliefs. This bestowed on him the image of a 'moral purist' and an 'idealist' by admirers and critics alike. Yet Moses' posturing should not be mistaken for naivety or lack of a keen sense of control or pragmatics. SNCC-worker Julian Bond once pleaded to think of Moses as a "poet-visionary," a "utopian thinker" but one with enough "tactical or common sense." As his 1956 yearbook revealed, Moses might be an "unmitigated idealist," but he was "deliberately ambivalent about it," leaving his classmates to conclude that "in spite of the way he muddles his academic and human ideas he has quite a firm grip on that shy personality of his. In other words, there is something puckish behind that monk's façade." It included an apt example: "Were you to break into his 'philosopher's closet' by surprise, you would assuredly catch him conversing...with The Absolute; but if you questioned him on the spot, he would systematically doubt you out of affirming that a conversation was taking place when you entered. His retort to both idealist and skeptic is the same tongue-in-cheek: 'You know that what you believe is true, don't you?'"<sup>41</sup>

Moses also used 'neither victims nor executioners' as a justification for pacifism. Even though he had not fully defined his position towards nonviolence yet, he noted that this "kind of thread had been [present] all through my life." In high school he had read Albert Schweitzer, who, like Camus, argued for ethics as instrumental in enduring peace. A 1955 *New York Times* article noted that Hamilton students were "voluntarily" reading Schweitzer too. At the NYU library Moses immersed himself in eastern nonviolent thought again. Particularly his favorite, high school interest Lao-Tse, called for 'action through inaction' and humility in leadership, mirroring the restraint and self-efficacy Moses later displayed as an organizer. Camus' stress on moral purity in the face of violence added a sensation of empowerment and human dignity to this.<sup>42</sup>

These ideas were easily aligned with the nonviolent tactics of Martin Luther King and those in the later student movement. Many of them had based their commitment to nonviolence on Gandhian principles or on traditional Christian thought, such as Jesus' Sermon on the Mount that taught "if someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Matthew 5:38-42) and the Sermon on the Plain to "Love your enemies" (Luke 6:27). This assignment, however, implied that nonviolence was not just a tactic, but a way of life—an assumption not all movement activists shared. Yet regardless of their final objective, Eric Burner observed, nonviolence in civil rights protests "amounted to a defiance of authority and custom and at the same time a refusal to strike back against attack" that "required precisely the self-knowledge and composure affirmed by *The Rebel*."<sup>43</sup>

Moses' attraction to pacifism, however, did not derive solely from secular philosophers: it also owed something to the Quakers. The Quakers, or Society of Friends, adhere to an unconventional form of Christianity that advocates freedom of conscience. Central in its theology is the innate presence of God, the 'Inner Light,' in each individual, which translated itself in a radical dismissal of religious symbolism and

<sup>40</sup> Carson, *In Struggle*, 46; Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, transl. Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage International, 1991), 100-111, 125-132, 279-282 (Quotes found on pages 102 and 281); Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?* 94-5; Agger, *The Sixties At 40*, 184.

<sup>41</sup> Julian Bond and Andrew Lewis, eds., *Come Sit At The Welcome Table* (Mason: Thomson Learning Custom Publishing, 2002), 722; *The Hamiltonian*, Yearbook 1956, 126, Archives Hamilton College Library, Clinton, New York.

<sup>42</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 11, 1983, Taylor Branch Papers; "Required Reading Now Is Done Voluntarily," *New York Times*, November 13, 1955.

<sup>43</sup> Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 6.

church leaders as necessary interpreters of the divine to the mortal. In secular terms this echoed Camus' and Gregory Moses' insistence on individual agency and bottom-up leadership, as opposed to the intervention of hierarchical leadership in determining one's direction. The Quaker worship style was therefore one of silence (only then the 'Inner Light' could be heard), which suited Moses' quiet personality. By validating the godly existence in each individual, Quakers subscribed "to the ideal of radical human brotherhood" and hated "the sin and not the sinner." Accordingly, they believe the sacredness of all individuals should be retrieved through nonviolence and active involvement in social life.<sup>44</sup>

Several Quakers taught at Hamilton, whom Moses befriended. He got especially close to Professor Channing Richardson, a conscientious objector during World War II, and his wife. In 2010 Moses recalled that "they went out of their way to bring me into their family." He even did some babysitting for them, although it "was something that they initiated," and nothing he deliberately sought from them. Richardson influenced Moses' intellectual and activist leanings in a time he identified as still "searching" for an identity. He introduced him to Gandhi, whom Moses wrote a paper about in his junior year. At this time Gandhi was popular among other young African-American activists like Martin Luther King, James Lawson, and Bayard Rustin too. Lawson and Rustin had even been to India to study nonviolence; King followed in 1959.<sup>45</sup>

Noticing that Moses was "always" interested in "philosophical-religious type questions," Richardson then steered him to the Quaker-affiliated but independent American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), to which Rustin was closely related. In 1953 Moses contacted him. Rustin was a socialist Quaker pacifist from Pennsylvania, strongly connected with the Old Left through his 1930s and 1940s connections with the Young Communist League and A. Philip Randolph's labor movement (although he, like Randolph, later became a staunch anti-Communist). In 1941 Randolph and Rustin worked on the March on Washington Movement, which threatened President Roosevelt into banning racism in the defensive industry. In 1953 the eccentric Rustin was mostly known for his pacifist views and his association with A.J. Muste's peace organization the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), although he is now mostly remembered for instructing Martin Luther King in nonviolence and being the primary organizer of the 1963 March on Washington. From 1944-1946 he was jailed for draft resistance.<sup>46</sup>

Like the Quakers, the AFSC promoted social involvement and supported alternative military service by dismissing the draft as incompatible with individual freedom. Yet notions of conscientious objection (CO) were not commonly discussed in Moses' family, with one uncle having a high army position. His two brothers joined the military as well, although not in active combat. In 1983 Moses therefore confessed he did not have the "pacifist position worked out at that time." At best he "was doing some searching about what I felt, and I guess what I felt strongest was that I didn't want to go in the Army." Richardson advised him to contact the AFSC in New York City, which sent him to Rustin. In 2010 Moses said they met for the first time in the latter's apartment, where Rustin advised him and a few others about CO and other positions regarding the draft. While Rustin forgot this meeting ever occurred, it left an indelible impression on Moses. Not only was he amazed to "meet a black man, raised in the U.S. with a pronounced English accent," but he especially revered his act as one of individual agency: "in showing up I became somebody because I was the only Black kid coming in."<sup>47</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Staughton Lynd and Alice Lynd, eds., *Nonviolence in America: A Documentary History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), xii-xiii; Jervis Anderson, *Bayard Rustin: Troubles I've Seen* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 65.

<sup>45</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by author, Raleigh, NC., April 15, 2010; U.S. Department of Justice, "Resume of the Inquiry Conscientious Objector Robert Parris Moses," March 21, 1962; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 11, 1983, Taylor Branch Papers.

<sup>46</sup> Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 29; Anderson, *Bayard Rustin*, 60-61, 98-99, 183-196, 239-264.

<sup>47</sup> Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 14; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 326; Robert Parris Moses, interview by author, Raleigh, NC., April 15, 2010, and email interview by author, October 25, 2010; U.S. Department of Justice, "Resume of the Inquiry Conscientious Objector Robert Parris Moses," March 21, 1962; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Anne Romaine, September 1966/November 14, 1987, transcript, Anne Romaine Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Uni-



Moses applied for CO-status shortly after, although his move also had a distinctly religious undertone. In 1983 Moses qualified he had become “deeply involved” with the Intervarsity Christian Fellowship, a “fundamentalist Bible reading group” at Hamilton he had learned about through his job waiting tables. The head waiter, Corky, was the group’s driving force, with whom Moses attended conferences and prayer meetings. After his junior year he attended a summer camp in Canada with the group. His counselor was a German related to a “neo-orthodox movement...around Karl Barth. He introduced [me] to a whole [new] literature.” In 2010 Alvin Poussaint confirmed that Moses indeed “talked to me a lot about religion and spiritual issues, particularly during his first year at Hamilton.” He also avidly debated religion with his two Jewish roommates.<sup>48</sup>

However, Moses reflected in 1983, when he studied more philosophy during his sophomore year, he “began questioning and doubting” what he had been absorbing: “[It] threw me off the track.” But unwilling to give up his religious quest just yet, he sought new avenues to explore fundamentalist Christianity. He accordingly tried street preaching with a group a black West Indian woman, whose name he had received in the Canada camp, ran in New York. The group’s activities included singing and individuals, including Moses, were invited to talk. Street preaching occurred on Times Square and the Jewish area during weekends and in Brooklyn on Wednesdays. Moses mostly tried it on Times Square, but, as Branch and Burner depicted, his reserved demeanor and soft voice were incompatible with the job. To his later movement friends, who had grown up with bombastic, passionate preachers in the black church tradition, this fact seemed almost unbelievable. Dave Dennis for instance recounted in 2010 that he “was shocked” when he heard about “Moses standing on a corner of Times Square, preaching! I wish I could have seen it!”<sup>49</sup>

Yet this episode in Moses’ life was not a solid conversion to or identification with institutional religion. It was rather a prolongation of Moses’ overall search for a philosophy of his own that he stitched together from dozens of different experiences. The fundamentalist group was one more. Given his emerging love for active social involvement, it is not surprising that this phase proved short-lived. When he told his father he wanted to become a minister, but he replied that “the ministry was a calling, not just an occupation,” Moses swiftly dropped the thought. His experience with the Intervarsity Christian Fellowship nonetheless reinforced his budding views on pacifism: “All of that [was] involved in [my] decision about the Army.” With them he “got into correspondence with the draft board about the religious basis of my CO claim” after it had denied his request because, he explained in 1983, “I didn’t have any organized basis for my claim in any church that I had been brought up in.” Eventually he was granted a student deferment.<sup>50</sup>

Moses’ ideas on pacifism and social activism developed further when his Quaker professors pushed him to attend AFSC camps abroad. The Richardsons helped him get accepted into these programs, which, he acknowledged in 1983, got “me more involved into the questions about conscientious objection and nonviolence.” In 2010 he added that these AFSC-trips “really were mind-awakening, consciousness-awakening for me, particularly in being able to look at the country from, so to speak, from the ‘outside.’” The trips not only provided him with an exhilarating, politically oriented social life with people from Africa, Europe, Australia, and Asia at the impressionable age of 20, but also with constructive models for working towards social change. The goal of the camps, an AFSC brochure reads, was stimulating “a higher sense

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versity of North Carolina, Chapel Hill (hereafter cited as Robert Parris Moses, interview by Anne Romaine, September 1966/November 14, 1987, Anne Romaine Papers); Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 11, 1983, Taylor Branch Papers; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 29.

<sup>48</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 11, 1983, Taylor Branch Papers; Alvin Poussaint, email interview by author, October 2010; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 12.

<sup>49</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 11, 1983, Taylor Branch Papers; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 326; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 11-12; Dave Dennis, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 17, 2010.

<sup>50</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, “Resume of the Inquiry Conscientious Objector Robert Parris Moses,” March 21, 1962; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 12; Robert Parris Moses, interviews by Taylor Branch, August 11, 1983, and July 31, 1984, transcript, Box 108, Taylor Branch Papers.

of individual responsibility for society, and to create bonds of friendship between campers and the local community.” The latter had a central place: “In all their work, campers try to work with the members of the community” and encourage them “to feel an increased responsibility for their needy neighbors.” It was stressed too that all “should live in the spirit of peace.”<sup>51</sup>

In the summer of 1955 Moses attended these voluntary work camps in Europe. The AFSC paid all travel expenses and insurance, but volunteers had to contribute \$470 (although the AFSC offered financial aid if necessary). They also had to attend an orientation session before departure; Moses participated in one such session at the AFSC’s base near Philadelphia from June 28 to July 3. It provided practical information, but also included language classes, room for meditation and church, and lectures on the AFSC and pacifism. It explained the “practical and ideological reasons” behind the camps’ practice of having the volunteers’ maintenance “provided either wholly or in part by the community with whom you will be working.” The AFSC had sent newsletters with instructions beforehand, which advised to be ready to explain the U.S. to outsiders, including “the negative things.” It suggested studying the 1954 *Brown v. Topeka* Supreme Court ruling, organizations like the NAACP and the AFSC Race Relations Committee, and the American cooperative and labor movements. The newsletters also explained good ‘camp behavior,’ like not waiting “for other people to do the work,” “to realize you can live comfortably with very few possessions,” and to “remember that the camp probably existed before you ever arrived and that there are others with different experiences and philosophies.” These others may be “Communists, monarchists, anarchists, fascists, [or] atheists,” but all should “learn from each other” because “to understand all is to forgive all.”<sup>52</sup>

On July 4 Moses embarked on the *Columbia* in Quebec, to arrive in Paris in time to witness the Bastille Day celebrations. He then left for Mont L’Enclus in Belgium, where he helped erect a dormitory at an underprivileged children’s summer camp. The project, he recalled in 2010, was not very refined. It was small and offered little variety, including in the diet; they ate potato soup every night. He and nine volunteers from the US, UK, Belgium, France, Germany, and Sweden stayed for a month. In 2010 Moses related he was particularly “interested in the way the people in Europe received him.” He quickly found out. During a talk on his trips for Hamilton’s International Relations Club on October 24, 1955, he noted that the Europeans “were very interested in him because he was an American Negro.” Locals often approached him with shouts of “Congo, Congo,” the African nation Belgium had colonized. When he put the AFSC’s advice to the test, however, he discovered “surprised that they had not heard of the Supreme Court decision...The people were full of questions about the Negro problem in America.”<sup>53</sup>

After Belgium he went to Metz in France to construct houses for the homeless with African, Middle Eastern, Ceylon, and French volunteers. Because there were no machines, their work included “hard manual labor, such as mixing cement and pouring foundations,” but Moses liked it regardless. In 2010 he said he had worthwhile encounters with the other volunteers, especially because he spoke French. Moreover, the camp “was much bigger, and [had] a different level of sophistication in terms of people who were running it and [in] their political orientation.” He for instance stayed with pacifists who, like Camus, had been part of the French Resistance. Coming into contact with people who had lived through World War II must have affected his thinking, but overall he emphasized discovering a new-found feeling of personal worth reminiscent of his father’s egalitarian teachings: “I don’t think I got into people that I would think

<sup>51</sup> Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 14; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 326; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 11, 1983, Taylor Branch Papers; Robert Parris Moses, interview by author, Raleigh, NC., April 15, 2010; Brochure “Friends International Work Camps,” 1956, Archive American Friends Service Commission, Pennsylvania.

<sup>52</sup> Memoranda “Orientation Program,” June 3-8, 1955, and “Notes to Volunteers,” January, February, April, May, 1955, Archive American Friends Service Commission, Pennsylvania.

<sup>53</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by author, Raleigh, NC., April 15, 2010; “Moses Speaks to I.R.C. Monday on Summer in European Camps,” and “Moses Describes European Travels to IRC Meeting,” *The Spectator*, October 21 and 28, 1955, Archives Hamilton College Library, Clinton, New York.

now were radical in their politics...Mainly I got into a sense of what it meant to be in a kind of network of people who were open to you as a person...I didn't have that either at Stuyvesant [or] Hamilton."<sup>54</sup>

*The Spectator*, Hamilton's newspaper, stated that Moses ended the summer in Bremen, Germany, after "hitch-hiking through Switzerland for a week." For a fortnight he worked on a farm in Bremerhafen, digging up potatoes for a nearby missionary hospital with "20 other American, Canadian, French, German, Dutch, Australian, Spanish, and Scandinavian workers." Among them was a white girl from the American South. Her experience, Moses noted in 2010, illustrated perfectly his point about the eye-opening value of viewing one's country from the outside: "There were interesting discussions in which people were really sort of astounded by her description [of southern race relations and] *acceptance* of 'well, this is the way we live'...in this part of the United States."<sup>55</sup>

In 1956 Moses went to an AFSC camp in Japan, where he attended Quaker workshops and helped build a stairway on a steep hill near a children's mental hospital, so the patients could ascend the hill more safely during the rainy season. He deliberately went to the camp early, he recounted in 2010, because he wanted to "have the experience of living with Japanese people." With two other Japanese campers he stayed at a Buddhist monastery for a week to study its beliefs, and spent the night at the home of one of its monks. Japan was a new experience altogether: "Japan was really eye-opening in a very different way of thinking about life...[T]he practice of religion really was daily and integrated into [the monk's] routines that he did around his house...So that was very different if you think about the church leaders here." Moreover, he was amazed to discover that the monk's wife "was actually nursing three of her girls" although the oldest was at least five, and that the Japanese had different concepts about food. He particularly remembered their fascination with aesthetics: "What mattered was how the eggs *looked* on the plate" rather than whether they were served warm.<sup>56</sup>

Overall the trips strengthened Moses' beliefs in pacifism, internal peace through meditation, and working for people society liked to ignore. They raised his racial awareness and broadened his knowledge of progressive activist groups. According to Taylor Branch, his writings about them impressed the Hamilton faculty. Moreover, the trips provided an opportunity for reflection in a time when Moses was still trying to define his role in the world. The trip to Japan was especially welcome, he said in 2010, as he faced graduation and a new crossroads in life: "[I]t was good being away and also being kind of alone, because particularly I didn't speak any Japanese [and] no-one spoke any English." The restlessness about his identity that had troubled Moses as a child had not eased much when he left Hamilton—ironically largely because of it.<sup>57</sup>

While grappling with one's identity is characteristic of adolescents, Moses' situation was complicated by the issue of race. At Hamilton, he recalled, he underwent a "total immersion in white upper-middle class atmosphere." Being one of only three blacks in the college's 750 student body, it surpassed his experiences at Stuyvesant. Like his high school, however, Hamilton advocated some sense of social responsibility. In 1954 it awarded McCarthy critic Edward Murrow an honorary degree, and Chief Justice Earl Warren, who in the *Brown*-suit had ruled the 'separate-but-equal'-clause that justified segregation unconstitutional, was the speaker at Moses' 1956 commencement. Warren, *The New York Times* reported, told the students that "whatever you accomplish will depend largely on what you make of your government." In this Warren echoed the progressive tradition of Stuyvesant, emphasizing democracy. Hamilton's

<sup>54</sup> Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 14; Robert Parris Moses, interview by author, Raleigh, NC., April 15, 2010; "Moses Describes European Travels to IRC Meeting," *The Spectator*, October 28, 1955.

<sup>55</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by author, Raleigh, NC., April 15, 2010.

<sup>56</sup> Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 326; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 14-15; Cagin and Dray, *We Are Not Afraid*, 87; Robert Parris Moses, interview by author, Raleigh, NC., April 15, 2010; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 11, 1983, Taylor Branch Papers.

<sup>57</sup> Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 326; Robert Parris Moses, interview by author, Raleigh, NC., April 15, 2010.

acceptance of blacks in itself was progressive too, although Moses warned in 1964 not to embellish this: “When I was at Hamilton the white attitude was: ‘Well...society has the overall problem, [and our part is] to try and open a door for two or three Negroes, and let’s see what happens.’ The difference from the period before is simply that earlier they weren’t interested in even opening a door.” To illustrate his point he recalled in 2011 how he remarked to a professor after the *Brown*-suit “that I went to segregated schools in NYC” too, but the latter denied “that as an instance of racism.”<sup>58</sup>

Getting involved in Hamilton’s student life therefore meant confronting his own internal struggles over race. He deliberately rejected offers from fraternities to join them as their ‘token Negro.’ It took two years before Moses accepted an invitation to join the student Emerson Literary Society, although it displayed an unusually high level of social consciousness. Despite this eventual participation in student politics—which Eric Burner suggested likely gave him “some insight into what college students might be capable of doing when he [enlisted] their help” in Mississippi—overall Moses withdrew as much as possible into his own world. One student verified Moses “lived in some isolation” because “many of us had never really related to blacks in any significant way before.” This attitude is confirmed by Moses’ comment of longing for a “network of people who were open to you as a person,” and finding it in Europe for the first time. While he generally characterized integration as positive, he simultaneously felt that white middle class culture was in “vital need of some kind of renewal.” Moses explained in 1964 that he had been “glad to have the opportunity” to study at Hamilton, but was still “deeply bitter about some of the realities of the campus and the white attitude” towards blacks. To survive he developed “the capacity...to pass through unobtrusively” by placing himself “in the role of observer, listening and watching, learning how the dominant society feels.” He even taught himself to “repress my feelings or at least expression of my feelings whenever I felt humiliated,” a mind-set that fitted his already natural tendency for self-efficacy.<sup>59</sup>

Moses’ feelings were not uncommon for blacks who attended disproportionately white northern schools. “White liberalism was just a facade. Whereas people spoke to us and ate with us and laughed and talked with us and played football[,]they never invited us to their parties,” black SNCC-worker Robert Wright described his time at Harvard University. This “really shocked [blacks] into realizing that they were different.” Martin Luther King, who excelled academically at integrated Boston University in the same time period, felt equally self-conscious. According to biographer David Lewis, “racial stereotypes beset him on all sides,” so King took to “seriousness, personal neatness, and punctuality” to avoid the image of the “happy-go-lucky dinky.” Others, like Malcolm X, simply responded by rejecting integration altogether.<sup>60</sup>

Moses’ and King’s response, however, can perhaps be considered a northern version of what Richard Wright called his ‘Jim Crow education,’ that is, learning how to behave in the white world to survive. Moses acknowledged that “many African Americans becoming deeply involved with white society for the first time” adopted “a way of watching as opposed to engaging” similar to his self-repression at Hamilton. When he speaks of “passing through unobtrusively” it can literally refer to his self-effacing nature, but metaphorically then it invokes the notion of a ‘racial passing,’ an academic term used when members of one racial group deliberately identify with another. Historian Thomas Sugrue underscored that for many northern blacks “the only way to cross the black-white [class] boundary was to adopt ‘white’ attitudes, lifestyles, and culture.” In this light Moses’ attraction to Camus is hardly surprising

<sup>58</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 10, 1983, Taylor Branch Papers. See also Taylor Branch’s handwritten notes accompanying the interview; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 13, 15; Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?* 90, 98-99; “Murrow To Be Honored,” *New York Times*, March 13, 1954; “Warren At Hamilton,” *New York Times*, June 4, 1956; Robert Parris Moses, email interview by author, March 13, 2011.

<sup>59</sup> Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 11, 14; Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?* 90, 97-99; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 27-28, 36-37.

<sup>60</sup> Robert Wright, interview by John Britton, July 28, 1968, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spangarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington DC; David Levering Lewis. *Martin Luther King: A Critical Biography* (London: Penguin Books, 1970), 28.

either: his work was set against the independence struggle of his native Algeria from his home, France, which divided his loyalty.<sup>61</sup>

Simultaneously Moses also appreciated internal struggles like his own and those of Camus, because they provided him, in Charles Payne's words, with "a sense of the importance of the individual embedded in a broader social analysis." After all, Moses explained in 1964, within that "struggle you find a broader identification...with individuals that are going through the same kind of struggle, so [it] doesn't remain just a question of racial struggle. Then you get a picture of yourself as a person [and the] problem of identifying yourself in Negro culture—or of integrating into the white society—that disappears."<sup>62</sup>

In his academic self-appraisal, however, Moses remained deeply insecure despite his excellent grades. Even when a fellowship granted him access to the doctoral philosophy program at Harvard University in 1956 he experienced constant "doubt that I could do the Harvard philosophy work." This, he explained in 1983, was because of the always present "race question: can you compete with whites? And there was a myth that you could find a place in which it was possible to get an 'objective assessment' of how well you could compete, and that was Harvard." Yet he remained "torn between belief in the myth [and] the myth itself," which "left him wondering whether he really couldn't do the work." He nonetheless persevered because "there wasn't anything else at the time I wanted to do." He moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts, and earned his M.A. in philosophy in June 1957, and then commenced a PhD-position. He worked two nights a week as a night grill attendant at the Harvard Business School, from November 1956 to May 1957, as well, and part-time as a maintenance man for a Quaker meeting house between October 1957 and March 1958. According to one of its officials, he "attended Friends meetings two or three times a month but was not an enrolled member."<sup>63</sup>

Harvard opened a new avenue of looking at life questions. Existentialism was "scoffed at" in favor of analytical philosophers like Wittgenstein, who, in Branch's words, had "put aside the ancient riddles [of truth and being] until they could find a way to make words as precise and scientific as numbers." This attracted Moses, who took Wittgenstein's aphorism "whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" to heart, as it fitted his taciturn disposition. Moses also worked closely with Professor John Blythe, who had written on analytic logician Alfred North Whitehead, then "the ideal of what a philosopher ought to be."<sup>64</sup>

One existentialist, Paul Tillich, however, was actually teaching at Harvard and was still widely influential. Martin Luther King for instance was fascinated by Tillich around the same time as well; he even wrote his dissertation on him in 1955. Moses had likewise read his major works, which, he related in 1983, "had had a big influence on me." But he had not understood everything Tillich meant, so he decided to attend his lectures. Yet, Moses found, Tillich's lectures were "all poetry." He and other graduate students agreed "that according to Wittgenstein, [Tillich] hadn't said anything at all. He was just playing with words," using too many metaphors and other stylistic ornaments. Nonetheless, that analysis "bothered" Moses because he still "wanted to know...what the subtle, hidden meaning was" that Tillich conveyed. While the analytic approach left permanent traces in Moses' thinking, such as his fixation with clarity and purity in language, overall his strong identification with existentialism remained unaltered: "I tired of thinking and [of] the meaning of meaning. I returned to Camus's dictum 'I rebel, therefore we exist' and

<sup>61</sup> Richard Wright, "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow—An Autobiographical Sketch," in Richard Wright, *Uncle Tom's Children* (New York: Perennial, 2004), 5-15; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 27-28; Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 425.

<sup>62</sup> Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?* 97; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 234.

<sup>63</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 10, 1983, Taylor Branch Papers. See also Taylor Branch's handwritten notes accompanying the interview; U.S. Department of Justice, "Resume of the Inquiry Conscientious Objector Robert Parris Moses," March 21, 1962.

<sup>64</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 10, 1983, Taylor Branch Papers. See also Taylor Branch's handwritten notes accompanying the interview; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 326-327.

to Lao-Tse, who taught that the way to wisdom consists in living one life well—starting small, a step at a time, with what is near, with what is at hand.” What was at hand for Moses, however, soon changed.<sup>65</sup>

### 2.3. This Was The Answer

In February 1958 Gregory and Louise Moses returned from their first ever vacation, despite Louise’s suffering from cancer. According to Eric Burner, their three children sensed something was wrong, but their mother had forbidden her husband to tell them the truth. So when the news reached Moses at Harvard that month that his mother had died at age 43, he defined this as his “greatest shook-up,” because “she was young, and it was sudden.” Alvin Poussaint recalled that Moses was “very close to his mother. When [she] died he was absolutely devastated with grief.” Moses had been especially impressed with how she dealt with her life’s agony, dominated by her husband’s drinking, financial strains, and disease: “She showed me how to live silence, quietly.” When he worked at the NYU Library, he even arranged a front desk job for his mother there too, he recalled in 2011: “It was a long trip downtown for her but it gave her a life outside of the home.” Still, he summarized, “My mother influenced my way of being quietly circumscribed, grounded independent of a need for accumulating things.” His choice to adopt her middle name in 1965, when he briefly renounced the Moses-name, was indicative of her significance to him. In a revealing choice of words, in 2001 Moses admitted another indebtedness to her: “[H]er passing on early... released me to do what was coming, the movement.”<sup>66</sup>

In March, Moses dropped out of Harvard. His brother Gregory was in the Army and his younger brother Roger studied at Hamilton, so he returned home to “be closer with my father.” Gregory Moses had not coped well with his wife’s passing. After the funeral he suffered a mental breakdown that Moses contributed to despair. He told his family he was leaving for a while, packed and left. Before the day was over, Moses, packing to return to Harvard, received a phone call from the police, who had “found [him] raving, hurting himself, shouting that he was movie star Gary Cooper.” Moses’ father stayed in Bellevue Hospital’s psychiatric ward until summer. At age 23, Moses had now witnessed both his parents succumb to a mental breakdown. Yet such episodes were not uncommon in the black community. Gunnar Myrdal discovered in 1944 that in New York black admissions to state mental hospitals was double that of whites’ and that blacks were “reported to have more hallucinations.” He explained these discrepancies through “the tensions and crisis of [black] life,” with upper-middle class blacks “[feeling these] frustrations more intensively.” To Moses the history of mental illness in his family was painful regardless. He stayed to take care of his father, even when the latter eventually returned to work.<sup>67</sup>

Until then Moses needed employment for them to survive. He therefore signed a three year contract, from 1958 to 1961, as a mathematics teacher at Horace Mann high school. Horace Mann was one of the country’s top private schools, located in the Bronx. This also safeguarded Moses’ CO-status because after ‘Sputnik’ had established that the Soviet Union’s technology outshone the Americans’, the U.S. government had qualified math and science teachers for deterrent. Moses liked teaching, but the racial realities at the predominantly white school kept frustrating him. He was again confronted “at every point... that you [were] treated as a Negro and you couldn’t really be accepted as an individual yet—even at any

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.; Moses interview Carson, 1982; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Anne Romaine, September 1966/November 14, 1987, Anne Romaine Papers.

<sup>66</sup> Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 16; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 327; Robert Parris Moses to Dorothy Miller, no date, James Forman Papers, Library of Congress\*; King, *Freedom Song*, 145; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 223; Alvin Poussaint, email interview by author, October 2010; Robert Parris Moses, email interview by author, March 10, 2011. \*When I researched the James Forman Papers at the Library of Congress in 2008 these had not been catalogued yet. It is therefore impossible to record box and/or folder numbers as they are no longer up to date.

<sup>67</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by Anne Romaine, September 1966/November 14, 1987, Anne Romaine Papers; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 16; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 327; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 10, 1983, Taylor Branch Papers; Myrdal, *An American Dilemma-Volume II*, 979-982.



level of the society you happened to penetrate.” Consequently, Moses concluded, he “got the feeling that no matter what I did it would always be there, even though things were better [than] in my father’s time.”<sup>68</sup>

Another pointed reminder came when one Horace Mann alumnus, white liberal heavyweight Allard Lowenstein, spoke at the school in 1959. At Moses’ request Lowenstein later aided two Mississippi SNCC projects, but at this stage he was a complete unknown to him. Neither did they interact personally, so, Moses reflected in 1989, “when his name came up again [in SNCC] I don’t think I had any real associations.” What was memorable about the visit, however, were Lowenstein’s comments about needing to establish the right to vote in communist-dominated Europe. Moses quarreled with a fellow teacher about it. When Moses interjected that blacks in the US were still disenfranchised as well, his coworker bluntly replied: “That’s different.”<sup>69</sup>

Moses’ racial consciousness grew further when he accepted another job as the private tutor of Frankie Lymon, an African-American teenage singer who had scored a nr. 6 position at the *Billboard* singles charts in 1956. Moses accompanied him when he toured the North by bus. Lymon, doing drugs, would not study so Moses soon left. Yet travelling to the black neighborhoods of a dozen Northern cities, including Chicago and Boston, provided another educative experience. Despite his Harlem background, Moses recalled “not really awakening to the idea that there was an urban black archipelago” until now. Seeing these communities upset him. As historian Nicholas Lemann described, “In all these places there was a heady sense of the coming into being of an established black presence,” but “it was plain that something was wrong. The poor sections were getting worse, the middle class felt stuck, and there was not a governing idea about what the problem was and what the reaction to it should be.” This echoed witnessing his father and others in his personal network struggle to get ahead, a condition that, Moses now realized, “exemplified the economic and emotional situation of many blacks in the cities.”<sup>70</sup>

But Moses had no idea what to do about it and did not get involved in any civil rights activism until 1960. Although several historians claim that he participated in the 1959 Youth March for Integrated Schools, in 2010 he denied this: “I wasn’t there and didn’t even know about it.” He had not even followed events in the South much: “I was cocooned in the isolation of Hamilton...the Emmet Till murder, the Montgomery boycott, the emergence of Dr. King were external happenings.” Nor was he involved in New York’s grassroots civil rights activism. In 1964 Moses admitted that he “wasn’t really a part of what was going on in Harlem” due to his teaching in a “fancy prep school,” although he “certainly...knew that there [were] tremendous problems there.” He nonetheless believed “that there was not on the horizon an inkling of where the solutions would come from” and did not know “if anybody was...doing something about them” despite local newspapers’ coverage of grassroots protests. Even if “New York became a ground zero for northern civil rights protests,” as Thomas Sugrue maintained, for Moses the idea of an advanced racial movement in his home town accordingly did not register. This raises the question of what constitutes a ‘movement,’ because New York had seen grassroots agency through direct action and legal protests and had a large civil rights organizational presence, including the NAACP’s headquarters. Yet the widespread *feeling* of a mass movement for change appeared absent. To ordinary northern blacks in the late fifties, like Moses, this budding sensation was then rather associated with

<sup>68</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interviews by Taylor Branch, July 30 and 31, 1984, Box 108, Taylor Branch Papers; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 27; Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?* 90.

<sup>69</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 10, 1983, Taylor Branch Papers; Robert Parris Moses, interview by William Chafe, October 7, 1989, transcript, Allard Lowenstein Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

<sup>70</sup> Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 16-17; Handwritten notes Taylor Branch, 16 January 1999, Taylor Branch Papers; Lemann, *The Promised Land*, 99; Jane Bond Moore, “A SNCC Blue Book,” in *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010), Faith S. Holsaert, et al., 328.



the South—about which they heard through television, newspapers, churches, and personal networks including southern relatives—not their own region.<sup>71</sup>

In early February of 1960, Moses' eye for instance caught a *New York Times* article on Greensboro, North Carolina, where four black A&T College students had staged a sit-in at a Woolworth's whites-only lunch counter. The A&T students had expanded their protests daily, catching the local media's attention. By the end of the week, sit-ins had exploded across Greensboro and elsewhere in the state. Soon other cities followed in South Carolina, Tennessee, Georgia, and Louisiana. The sit-ins eventually reached all southern states—and every news outlet for months on end—although generally only in urban areas with colleges nearby. This created, as one historian said, “an image of a quickly spreading, dynamic, energetic and spontaneous movement.” The North witnessed sympathy protests and, *The New York Times* reported, southern sit-in leaders came to New York to encourage rallies there. By the end of 1960 over 70,000 people had participated in sit-ins, leading to over 3,000 arrests and, a Southern Regional Council report stated, the dismissal of “at least 141 students and 58 faculty members” from Southern educational institutions. Nonetheless, outside the Deep South, the students' efforts proved successful: lunch counters in national chain stores and several Southern ones were integrated. A national audience received the sit-in students sympathetically: they witnessed neatly dressed blacks studying at lunch counters being heckled by whites, while they generally refused to retaliate. Consequently, historian Clayborne Carson noted, “rather than [a rejection of mainstream] American life, the sit-ins were viewed as an outgrowth of racial assimilation.” An image of the student movement was thus created that, in Howard Zinn's words, “was impressive, even to those not really convinced” of the tactic's wisdom.<sup>72</sup>

News coverage of the sit-ins riveted Moses too. In this sense, the sit-ins posed an interesting example of the local influencing the national and vice versa, with students across the nation copycatting what they saw on the news in their own neighborhoods. Even if not prompted into action themselves, they broadened their awareness of civil rights activities elsewhere. In *Freedom On My Mind*, Mississippi teenager L.C. Dorsey related how she “ran to read the stories” about the sit-ins. Another Mississippi local, Victoria Gray, was attracted to them because they uncovered “a support system that wasn't there before,” or rather, one that had been largely invisible. In 1962 Moses similarly validated the effect of news coverage on him: “I saw a picture in *The New York Times* of Negro college students ‘sitting in’ at a lunch counter... [They] had a certain look on their faces—sort of sullen, angry, determined. Before the Negro in the South had always looked on the defensive, cringing. This time they were taking the initiative. They were kids my age, and I knew this had something to do with my own life.”<sup>73</sup>

Moses experienced what many blacks would whenever they were confronted with a civil rights demonstration far from home but yet so close: “The pictures attracted me because I could feel myself in the faces of the people that they had there on the front pages. I could feel how they felt.” As such, he attested, the sit-ins “hit me powerfully, in the soul as well as the brain. I was mesmerized by the pictures I saw almost every day...young committed Black faces seated at lunch counters or picketing, directly and with great dignity.” Other northern SNCC-workers were similarly captivated. Stokely Carmichael called the sit-ins “spectacular,” remarking he could not forget “looking with amazement and joy at...the *New York Times*.” In fact, he added, “nearly all of my allies in [Howard University's Nonviolent Action Group] had

<sup>71</sup> Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 179; Robert Parris Moses, email interview by author, March 10, 2011; Bob Moses, “Speech,” (West Coast Civil Rights Conference, April 23, 1964), transcript, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, University of Southern Mississippi, Jackson, MS.

<sup>72</sup> Martin Oppenheimer, *The Sit-In Movement of 1960* (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publishing, 1989), 80, 85-98; Bond and Lewis, eds., *Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table*, 388-391; Emanuel Perlmutter, “Sit-Ins Backed By Rallies Here,” *New York Times*, March 6, 1960; Carson, *In Struggle*, 9-18; Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*, 16-28.

<sup>73</sup> Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 3; *Freedom On My Mind*, directed by Connie Field and Marilyn Mulford, Clarity Educational Productions, 1994; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 17; Ben H. Bagdikian, “Negro Youth's New March on Dixie,” *Saturday Evening Post*, September 8, 1962.

been inspired into social activism [by] Greensboro.” To Moses, identification with the students ran especially deep because of his immersion in white society: “Until then, my Black life was conflicted, [having moved] back and forth between the sharply contrasting worlds of Hamilton College, Harvard University, Horace Mann, and Harlem.” In a W.E.B. DuBois-like explanation of double-consciousness, he continued: “It made me realize that for a long time I had been troubled by the problem of being a Negro [and] being an American. This was the answer.”<sup>74</sup>

That answer corresponded with Moses’ budding outlook on the production of social change. First, as SNCC’s Mary King asserted, the “sit-ins were profound in their insistence that belief and action are one. [They] were saying that nothing else counts except the willingness to act out your beliefs.” This of course echoed Camus’ credo of moral leadership by example. Second, the students used nonviolence, which Moses could relate to through his pacifist studies and Camus. “What attracted me,” Moses confirmed in 2009, “was their ability to find a way to express their feelings in a strategy that I felt comfortable with...what I saw in what the students were doing was walking a very fine line: they had refused to be victims but they also weren’t trying to be executioners against the society.” Third, they conformed to American middle-class values that reflected the white environment Moses had become familiar with. Fourth, the sit-ins’ public image was one of a decentralized, leaderless movement, leaving Howard Zinn to conclude that “spontaneity and self-sufficiency were the [sit-ins’] hallmarks; without adult advice or consent, the students...carried them through.” This corresponded with Camus’ and Gregory Moses’ lessons on individual agency, self-empowerment, and bottom-up leadership.<sup>75</sup>

Later studies of the sit-ins, like Martin Opperheimer’s and Aldon Morris’, qualified this image of youthful independence. They demonstrated that many sit-ins (including Greensboro to some extent) were preceded by careful planning, the creation of communication networks, and training in nonviolence, and were aided through existing organizations and northern groups with resources like funding and lawyers. Also, the tactic itself went back to the 1940 activities of the civil rights organization CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) and the 1930s labor movement. In the late 1950s sit-ins had already occurred in Kansas and Tennessee as well, but the 1960s sit-ins involved law breaking on an unprecedented scale. They thereby took, as one historian said, “mass action to a higher stage.” Moreover, students, rather than traditional middle class adults, protesting nonviolently en masse was a new phenomenon. The general reaction to the sit-ins was therefore similar to Moses’, as Zinn wrote in 1965: “A Negro never before seen...was brought into the national view,” as “the idea so long cherished...that only a handful of agitators opposed the system of segregation, was swept aside... Montgomery[’s 1955 bus boycott] had been the first sign of this, and now it was made clear beyond argument.”<sup>76</sup>

Moses immediately wanted to go South to “see the sit-ins firsthand” and participate himself: “I was struck by the determination on their faces. They weren’t cowed [nor] apathetic—they

<sup>74</sup> Moses interview Carson, 1982; Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 140; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 3; *Freedom On My Mind*, directed by Connie Field and Marilyn Mulford, Clarity Educational Productions, 1994; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 17; Carson, *In Struggle*, 17; W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), 5. W.E.B. DuBois’ famous passage in his *The Souls of Black Folk*, published in 1903, astutely describes this sense of ‘double-consciousness’: “One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”

<sup>75</sup> Greenberg, ed., *Circle of Trust*, 25; Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*, 29; *The Story*, episode “Dedicated to the Proposition: The March to Equality,” February 11, 2009, WUNC-FM Radio, University of North Carolina.

<sup>76</sup> Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 200, 203; Oppenheimer, *The Sit-In Movement of 1960*, 43, 44, 49; Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem The Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 65; Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*, 26.

meant to finish what they had begun. Here was something that could be done. I simply had to get involved.” During spring break Moses therefore visited Uncle Bill in Virginia. Reflecting the changing ties of northern migrants with their southern heritage, he “had never wanted to go” South before, but now could not resist. When Moses then witnessed students picketing a Woolworth’s store in Newport News, he instantly joined them. In 1962 Moses told *The Saturday Evening Post* that the experience unleashed unexpectedly profound emotions: “From the first time a Negro gets involved in white society, he [starts] repressing, repressing, repressing. My whole reaction through life to such humiliation was to avoid it, keep it down, hold it in, play it cool...But when you do something personally to fight prejudice there is a feeling of great release.”<sup>77</sup>

The visit to Newport News was revealing in another respect. Moses and his uncle attended a mass rally in support of the student protests. There Wyatt T. Walker of SCLC, Moses summarized in 1982, spoke “at length about King and the movement that was developing, and about leadership,” in particular “the need for everyone to coalesce behind a [national] leader[,] the implication being unite behind Dr. King’s leadership.” He also spoke of a new SCLC office in Harlem. Intrigued, Moses walked up to Walker afterwards to ask him “where we could get in touch with that.” Remembering Walker’s leadership comments, he also wanted to know whether Walker did not “think we need a lot of leaders?” After all, he explained the question’s logic in 1982, students from all over “were spreading, getting activated, and moving, [so] why put an emphasis then, on one person?” Walker gave “a quizzical look before offering the general and inarguable explanation of the need to support Dr. King. That hardly meant that the other organizations had no legitimacy, he claimed. We did not talk long.”<sup>78</sup>

Historians have often cited Moses’ question to Walker as indicative of Moses’ general philosophy, but at that moment he had not really thought these leadership matters through. Walker’s comments, he said, “struck me as strange, but this was my first contact with the movement.” Although his father’s egalitarian teachings, Camus, the Quakers, and the decentralized sit-ins primed him toward this position, he acknowledged in 1982 that the Walker incident merely was the beginning of a thinking process: “I hadn’t worked out any notions of leadership, except that I guess I had a feeling for what people later termed grassroots leadership, that is, that there should be leadership all over. [Walker’s emphasis just] struck me as wrong—that is, the emphasis, which I later came to learn was part of a pattern [of] the ways in which organizations are shaped and formed. And a lot has to do with the media, and the need for projection.”<sup>79</sup>

Moses left Virginia with the contact information of the Harlem SCLC office and news of a civil rights rally at his father’s workplace, the Armory, in May. He attended a Harlem church meeting chaired by Bayard Rustin that recruited organizers for the rally. He volunteered and decorated his neighborhood with posters announcing the event, which he attended. It featured celebrity activists like Harry Belafonte and Sidney Poitier, but Moses also witnessed Malcolm X conversing with actor and social activist Ossie Davis. In addition, Moses volunteered at the SCLC office every day after school. While the work was not very eventful—“stuffing envelopes, putting up posters, and handing out flyers”—being in an office run by veteran organizers, such as Rustin and Jack O’Dell, was. In the office, he reflected in 2010, “there [were] a lot of volunteers, a lot of conversations” about the

<sup>77</sup> Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 18; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 27-28; Moses interview Carson, 1982; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Anne Romaine, September 1966/November 14, 1987, Anne Romaine Papers; Ben H. Bagdikian, “Negro Youth’s New March on Dixie,” *Saturday Evening Post*, September 8, 1962; Cagin and Dray, *We Are Not Afraid*, 86.

<sup>78</sup> Moses interview Carson, 1982; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 18-19; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 28; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 300-301; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Anne Romaine, September 1966/November 14, 1987, Anne Romaine Papers.

<sup>79</sup> Moses interview Carson, 1982; Robert Parris Moses, interview by author, Raleigh, NC., April 15, 2010; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 28.

freedom struggle, which broadened his movement knowledge. For him it constituted the moment of becoming networked into a broader movement for social change. Yet, in hindsight, he remarked, “it’s really curious” that despite all the buzz around him “no-one ever mentioned SNCC,” which had been founded just weeks before.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Robert P. Moses, “Constitutional Property v. Constitutional People,” in *Quality Education as a Constitutional Right*, Theresa Perry et al., 79-80; Moses interview Carson, 1982; Robert Parris Moses, interview by author, Raleigh, NC., April 15, 2010; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 28; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 575, 850-851; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 10, 1983, Taylor Branch Papers; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Anne Romaine, September 1966/November 14, 1987, Anne Romaine Papers.

## 3. From the Iron Curtain to the Cotton Curtain

### 3.1. Introducing the Movement

For Bob Moses the summer of 1960 was a summer of firsts: his first extensive stay in the South, his first in depth contact with the movement, and his first trip to Mississippi. Seeking a form of activism that suited his personality, skills, and beliefs, he paid his dues by showing his willingness to be involved in direct action. However, he soon discovered that this was not what he was looking for. Through his rapport with African-American civil rights workers Ella Baker and Amzie Moore, however, he found a way to utilize his unique talents.

This journey of self-discovery started in mid-1960, when Moses became frustrated with his uneventful work at the New York SCLC office. He continued to feel “a pull to go South”—preferably the Deep South—and “see the movement for myself.” Although some historians insist that the civil rights movement was national in scope, Moses clearly regarded the South as the stage for the most discernible force in civil rights activism. He told Bayard Rustin he desired to work for Martin Luther King in Montgomery, Alabama. Moses’ choice illustrates his point about the power of media projection: while he could have joined any of the grassroots protests in the North or the sit-in students across the South, he nonetheless picked King’s organization. While his stay with SCLC was brief, it was long enough to get acquainted with the major organizations working for social change and to discern their distinctive characteristics.<sup>1</sup>

SCLC was founded in 1957 with Bayard Rustin’s and Ella Baker’s help in the wake of the Montgomery Bus Boycott with, as one historian noted, “the NAACP’s inadequacies very much in mind.” Unlike the integrated, members-only, nationally-oriented NAACP, SCLC’s focus was regional, all-black, and had no individual membership. The NAACP had a strong central body headquartered in New York with branches across the country. The latter exercised relative autonomy but were subjected to the NAACP’s national policies. This regularly meant that headquarters reprimanded local leaders if they participated in protests initiated by other organizations, or if their protests deviated from its focus on litigation or ‘respectable’ tactics like voter registration. It also desired its branches to emphasize collecting dues, but simultaneously could withdraw financial support from such branches if their results were insufficient or did not contribute adequately to the goals set by the central office. This often had disastrous consequences, especially in the Deep South where known NAACP-members were blacklisted from employment. Or, as one Mississippi member begged Gloster Current, the Director of Branch and Field Services, in 1964: “Mr. Current, to discontinue the assistance, means that everything I have built here will go to waste. I’ll have to leave town and the state to find work, because I have a family to support.” SCLC in turn was an umbrella organization of loosely affiliated southern associations, like the Montgomery Improvement Association. This allowed affiliates to coexist without fear of competition and to utilize a broad variety of approaches. SCLC, its founders recorded, “rejects unconditionally the single solution approach that dominated similar concerned organizations.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Moses interview Carson, 1982; Robert Parris Moses, “Forward” in *Delta Time: Mississippi Photographs*, Ken Light (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Publishing, 1995); *Freedom On My Mind*, directed by Connie Field and Marilyn Mulford, Clarity Educational Productions, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 33, 45; Andrew L. Johnson to Gloster Current, letter, April 22, 1964, and Aaron Henry to Gloster Current, letter, April 25, 1964, Group III, Box C-74, Part 27, Selected Branch Files, Microfilm, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Records (hereafter cited as Records NAACP), Library of Congress, Washington DC; “SCLC Organizational Structure,” founding document, no date, Files #00428-00430, Reel 5, Part 4, Series I, Records of Andrew J. Young, Records of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (hereafter cited as Records SCLC), Microfilm, Roosevelt Study Center, Middelburg, the Netherlands. The Records of SCLC are also located at the King Center in Atlanta, USA.

The NAACP, having been in existence since 1909, also focused intently on organizational routine and survival, making it democratic as well as overly bureaucratic. SCLC, on the other hand, rejected internal democracy. As one SCLC-historian wrote, it considered “organizational hardness [as] a liability rather than an asset” because it inhibited the ability to “move quickly as the circumstances changed and opportunities presented themselves” during civil rights campaigns. Instead the organization was designed to take advantage of the media attention that King acquired through his participation in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and intended to make him the ‘star’ of the movement—and the organization. He had obtained this position based on his leadership skills and ability to popularize a technique—nonviolence—he had refined with the help of veteran pacifist like Bayard Rustin and FOR’s Glenn Smiley. Consequently, whereas its Board of Director had 43 members (mostly male ministers from the urban South), it was never “a genuine policymaking body.” In reality SCLC functioned as “a benevolent autocracy” in which King consulted his advisors, but he “always had the last say.” This had clear benefits as SCLC’s hierarchical structure helped the media to put a focus on the organization through cover story-profiles on King. Already in 1957 he was on *Time*-magazine’s cover, which, Taylor Branch asserted, “established King as a permanent fixture of American mass culture.”<sup>3</sup>

Between 1957 and the sit-ins, however, SCLC accomplished little. Its voter registration program Crusade for Citizenship generated few new voters because it lacked extensive local organization by fulltime activists. During the sit-ins SCLC’s role was secondary to the students. Without a membership base, money after all had to come through King’s projection. Rather than developing programs, King thus spent much time fundraising through speeches and writings. Simultaneously SCLC’s ability to make snap, top-down decisions allowed it to move flexibly and effectively, and with its 1957 Prayer Pilgrimage and other headline-grabbing civil rights gatherings it seemed the new face of the southern movement. Moses therefore logically assumed that King equaled action. Visibility had to be central in his decision to join SCLC, because, despite all the incidents of civil rights activism in 1960, Moses stated, “I didn’t know anything about...civil rights politics” and “I didn’t know about SNCC.”<sup>4</sup>

SNCC was founded at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina, during the Southwide Youth Leadership Conference of April 15-17, 1960, after the sit-ins had uncovered a widespread social network in need of communication. Ella Baker initiated the conference, with \$800 of SCLC money, “to decide whether [the students] wanted to become a coordinated body or whether they still wanted to just continue... each on his own.” Over 200 delegates, counting a dozen whites, attended. Over half came from southern colleges or high schools, and the rest from northern colleges or were observers from organizations like CORE, FOR, AFSC, SDS, SCLC, NAACP, and the NSA (National Student Association). National press was also present. *The New York Times* published four articles on it, which focused on well-known conference attendees, like Martin Luther King and James Lawson, a black Vanderbilt University divinity student. The sit-in students, however, received King less favorably than Lawson, whose speech criticized middle-class black leadership—particularly that of the NAACP—for prioritizing fundraising, organizational structures, and gradualist tactics like litigation. The sit-ins, Lawson stated, were a “judgment upon middle class conventional, half-way efforts to deal with radical social evil.” This left *The New York Times* to report alarmingly about “a struggle between two factions in the fight for civil rights.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 92; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 203; David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: Vintage, 1988), 153; Fairclough, *To Redeem The Soul of America*, 4, 33-34, 38, 171.

<sup>4</sup> Fairclough, *To Redeem The Soul of America*, 4, 45, 57, 62; Moses interview Carson, 1982; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Anne Romaine, September 1966/November 14, 1987, Anne Romaine Papers.

<sup>5</sup> Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 132; Ella Baker, interview by John Britton, June 19, 1968, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University; Larry Rubin, ed., *Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary* (Conference Booklet, April 15-18, 2010), 20-21; Carson, *In Struggle*, 20-21, 22-24; Claude Sitton, “Dr. King Favors Buyers Boycott” and “Negro Criticizes NAACP Tactics,” *The New York Times*, April 16 and 17, 1960.



Lawson's speech provoked a furious reaction from NAACP Executive Secretary Roy Wilkins that boded ill for future relations between that organization and SNCC. Lawson had violated an unwritten rule that civil rights organizations, no matter how much they disagreed, refrained from publicly criticizing each other. Wilkins therefore wrote Lawson a fuming letter in which he castigated the latter's "shameless resort to the dubious appeal of class" and rejected how "some doctrinaires in each generation blithely dismiss the past as...completely impotent. [That all prior efforts] to end segregation have not accomplished the task does not mean...that an entirely new method must be adopted [and] 'useless' ones discarded." This generational conflict, however, strengthened the sensation among movement participants, reporters, and observers of a break with previous activism and a "new wave" represented by the students.<sup>6</sup>

Yet Moses' ignorance of SNCC's existence is not wholly surprising. Between April and July SNCC was hardly in the news. *The New York Times* even called it "unlikely" that the students "will take over leadership of the Southern Negroes." Part of this lack in coverage was deliberate. Baker said in 1968 that SNCC had shielded press attendance from any sessions "at which kids were trying to hammer out policy" because the presence of reporters might inhibit open discussions. Moreover, SNCC—then still the 'Temporary Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee'—had only one paid member, Jane Stembridge, and no clear identity. Although it considered its function to be the coordination of local student groups, finding immediate consensus about its goals and structure was impossible due to the diversity of the conference participants. As SNCC's Charles McDew recalled in 1967: "[The Birmingham people were] of the opinion that [SNCC] should be in the arms of SCLC [while the] Virginia people wanted an independent sort of movement with very loose ties with SCLC [and the] Georgia people seemed to have a preference for having no ties to SCLC" at all. Because of geographical, philosophical, race, and class differences—among the southern students and between the southern and northern students present—presenting a profile of the 'typical' SNCC-student is therefore difficult. However, in general SNCC's founders were young, highly esteemed democracy, rejected gradualism, and were open to nonviolent direct action, irrespective of end goal (tactic or way of life) and motivation (religious or secular).<sup>7</sup>

Some at Raleigh, however, were more assertive than others. Status in SNCC was related to one's activism during the sit-ins. In this none carried more prestige than the disproportionately large Nashville group, associated with James Lawson. Between 1958 and 1960 Lawson had directed workshops in nonviolence, which later SNCC-stalwarts like Diane Nash, John Lewis, Bernard Lafayette, James Bevel, and Marion Barry attended. They then orchestrated sit-ins in Nashville in late 1959 and more after Greensboro, with them instructing new students into the tactic. Still, many in SNCC questioned its insistence on nonviolence, or accepted its emphasis on redemption merely out of pragmatism. Anyone who "subjected [himself] to humiliation, brutality [or] arrests," SNCC-worker Mary King argued, "had to believe that America as a nation could experience shame and remorse." Historian Emily Stoper noted that even "in Nashville, there were those who were nonviolent chiefly because it was the popular strategy of the day. This was even more true of the other sit-in centers." Nonetheless, until 1962 the Nashville group's religious commitment to nonviolence dominated SNCC's discussions, which set the tone for what Clayborne Carson termed "its identity as a morally consistent activist community." This is evidenced by SNCC's first policy meeting on May 13-14, at which SNCC adopted the group's views into its official Statement of Purpose, written by Lawson:

"We affirm the philosophical or religious ideal of nonviolence as the foundation of our purpose, the presupposition of our faith, and the manner of our action. Nonviolence as it grows from

<sup>6</sup> Wilkins to Lawson, May 13, 1960, in *Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table*, eds. Bond and Lewis, 419-421.

<sup>7</sup> Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 203; Ella Baker, interview by John Britton, June 19, 1968, and Charles McDew, interview by Katherine Shannon, August 24, 1967, transcripts, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University; Claude Sitton, "Students Impatient With Old Efforts," *New York Times*, April 24, 1960 (see also his articles on April 16, 17, 18, 1960).

the Judaeo-Christian tradition seeks a social order of justice permeated by love...Love is the central motif of nonviolence. Love is the force by which God binds man to himself and man to man. Such love goes to the extreme; it remains loving and forgiving even in the midst of hostility. It matches the capacity of evil to inflict suffering with an even more enduring capacity to absorb evil, all the while persisting in love. By appealing to conscience and standing on the moral nature of human existence, nonviolence nurtures the atmosphere in which reconciliation and justice become actual possibilities.”<sup>8</sup>

The Statement’s usefulness as a reflection of SNCC’s earliest constituency has always remained disputable. In times of crisis it could not be used as guidance, Staughton Lynd observed, since “from the beginning SNCC promulgated a language with which most of its members did not fully agree.” Its placement of nonviolence solely in “Judaic-Christian traditions” further narrowed its utility because “it makes affirmations in which many persons cannot wholeheartedly join.” Other scholars, like Martin Oppenheimer, questioned whether all students truly understood its implications. Several founding members also insist that SNCC’s religious orientation has been exaggerated. As Julian Bond argued in 2008: “Even though many of the people in SNCC at the very first were [going to be ministers] I wouldn’t call us a religious organization at any time...Many of the people were religious, but the *organization* was not.” The May meeting therefore ended only with the bare essentials for “a functioning organization”: hiring Jane Stembridge as Executive Secretary and securing office space in SCLC’s Atlanta office through Ella Baker. Connie Curry of the Northern Student Association’s Southern Project let SNCC use NSA equipment. Even so, without Baker’s and Stembridge’s skills, Carson wrote, “SNCC would probably not have survived its first summer.”<sup>9</sup>

On July 4 Moses arrived by bus in Atlanta too. Rather than going to inactive Montgomery, Rustin had advised him to go to SCLC’s new headquarters. This proved an enormous let-down. He arrived hoping to stay until September and “to see ‘the movement’ as I idealized it,” with “energetic volunteers getting out mailings, bold campaigners preparing to hit the streets,” and “strategies for political struggle being conceived behind closed doors.” But unlike the “beehive of efficiency” at the New York office “there was nothing to do,” and, despite Rustin’s letters to King and Baker, he was not expected. Even the building was disappointing, with three small rooms occupied by only three workers: Baker, Stembridge, and King, who was rarely present. Only Stembridge, stuffing envelopes for SNCC, was there when Moses arrived. Feeling useless, he joined her without even asking “if it was all right for me to help.”<sup>10</sup>

Jane Stembridge, the daughter of a progressive-minded southern white Baptist minister, immediately got along with Bob Moses. The two shared interests in religion, philosophy, and their home town. She had interrupted her theological studies at Union Seminary in New York to join the movement because, she stated in August, she hoped “to find my own freedom” and to convert Southern whites: “I hurt for my people because they are liars, blind, and hypocrites [and] I came to speak to them.” While “licking at envelopes, one at a time,” the two talked animatedly about Niebuhr, Tillich, Kant, Jewish existentialist Martin Buber, and Camus’ and Gandhi’s theories on nonviolence. Often their discussions continued in “the back room of B.B. Beamon’s soul food restaurant,” until late in the night. Connie Curry

<sup>8</sup> Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 27, 35-36; Carson, *In Struggle*, 22-24, 25, 154; King, *Freedom Song*, 274-275; Greenberg, ed., *A Circle of Trust*, 34; Sellers and Terrell, *The River of No Return*, 35; Lynd and Lynd, eds., *Nonviolence in America*, 222; Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 27.

<sup>9</sup> Carson, *In Struggle*, 24-25; Lynd and Lynd, eds., *Nonviolence in America*, xli-xlii, 222; Julian Bond, interview by author, October 27, 2008, Washington, D.C.; Carson, *In Struggle*, 25-26; Ransby, *Ella Baker & The Black Freedom Movement*, 248, 252.

<sup>10</sup> Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 29; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Anne Romaine, September 1966 / November 14, 1987, Anne Romaine Papers; Branch, *Parting the Waters*. Page 575; Constance Curry, et al., eds., *Deep In Our Hearts: Nine White Women in the Freedom Movement* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2002), 10, 11, 15.

frequently joined them: “When it got to be about two o’clock in the morning, and you just thought you could not listen or do one other thing, we would order a chocolate nut sundae,” a practice Moses and she continued “every time” he returned from Mississippi. Their conversations also turned to leadership issues, as they grudgingly witnessed SCLC’s replacement of Ella Baker with Rev. Wyatt T. Walker.<sup>11</sup>

Moses was particularly sad to see Baker leave the organization. They had only spoken a few times, but she had confided to him that despite her role in SCLC’s foundation she was unhappy with its projection of King. As she explained in 1968, she had accepted his projection from the start for its symbolic value, but believed such symbolism should never “displace the need for knowledgeable leadership” because “there is no one person who can provide...the leadership needs of [an entire] movement.” Instead, Moses recalled in 1982, she told him she was more concerned with “building up grassroots leadership among SCLC [and] working with local leadership to build up a constituency.” This could break the historic cycle where blacks “put all [their] hopes in a leader, but then that leader often turns out to have feet of clay.” She stressed that people “cannot look for salvation anywhere but to themselves” and, subsequently, that “strong people don’t need strong leaders.” After all, she often repeated, charismatic leaders were created by the media and “the media may undo” them. With Walker’s appointment, however, SCLC moved farther away from facilitating grassroots initiatives and closer to a dependence on big names and male leadership. But Baker’s message resonated with Moses: it “was interesting to me, because I had had that experience with Wyatt in Newport News in the spring.”<sup>12</sup>

This again highlights the complexity of ideas and subsequent activism, as Baker’s views corresponded with something that was already innate in Moses before meeting her. Mary King recalled in 2009 that “Baker reinforced Bob’s own views, which were based on his own philosophical grappling with issues of ethics and questions of how to achieve lasting alterations rather than superficial adjustments.” The same could be argued for Baker too; she had always been inclined towards this position, but her decades-long experience in diverse civil rights organizations—being 56 she could have been King’s mother—confirmed its wisdom to her. In transporting her life experiences to Moses, she became his strongest role model to date. Her guidance strongly shaped SNCC’s outlook, so it is important to understand her background.<sup>13</sup>

The granddaughter of slaves, Ella Baker was born in Virginia in 1903, but grew up in rural North Carolina in what biographer Barbara Ransby called a middle-class “female-centered household, surrounded by a community of Christian women actively engaged in uplifting their families and communities.” Prompted by their mother—whom Baker said never deferred to white or male authority—she and her sister were instructed to emulate the image “of strong, intelligent, and socially engaged black women” and to behave as “representatives of the race to the white world and as role models for those less fortunate within the black community.” She always rebelled against notions that set her up as being ‘apart from’ the black masses (she particularly disliked the strict rules, elitism, and gender-confining notions prevalent at black Shaw University which she attended during the 1920s), but embraced the tenet in middle-class ideology of servicing others. After graduating from Shaw in 1927, she sought a group of like-minded people, leading to a long history of joining and leaving civil rights organizations.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Charles Marsh, *God’s Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights* (Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 1997), 102-103; Jane Stembridge to David Forbes, letter, August 14, 1960, File #0810, Reel 4, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files Jane Stembridge, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers, (hereafter cited as SNCC Papers), Microfilm, Roosevelt Study Center, Middelburg, the Netherlands. \* Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 34-36; Howell Raines, *My Soul is Rested: Movement Days in the Deep South Remembered* (New York: Penguin, 1977), 105; Ransby, *Ella Baker & The Black Freedom Movement*, 252-253. B.B. Beamon’s was a black-owned restaurant that often provided the movement with meeting space and free food. \*The SNCC Papers are also located at the King Center in Atlanta.

<sup>12</sup> Moses interview Carson, 1982; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 33; Ella Baker, interview by John Britton, June 19, 1968, transcript Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University; Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 93.

<sup>13</sup> Mary King, email interview by author, 8 December 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Ransby, *Ella Baker & The Black Freedom Movement*, 15-21.

Baker first tried her luck in Harlem, where she worked for the YWCA, the Library's Adult Education Committee, the Young People's Forum, and the Workers Education Project. She consequently internalized much of Depression-era Harlem's leftist milieu. In 1940 she joined the staff of the NAACP and as its Director of Branches traveled the country extensively, particularly the South, to recruit new members. During these trips she met numerous southern civil rights leaders, who strengthened her faith in bottom-up organizing; that is, finding someone who already worked as an activist and then supporting him with "whatever was lacking—funds, time, youthful energy, and certain skills." With the blessing of A. Philip Randolph, she, Bayard Rustin and Stanley Levison founded In Friendship in 1956, which provided financial assistance to southern activists suffering from reprisals for their activity. She had resigned from the NAACP in 1946 because she questioned its commitment to developing local programs; she believed the national officers saw the local membership solely as supporters of the national office, treating them "in terms of numbers and dollars rather than as a mass organization." She also resented its centralized structure and the sexism of its Assistant National Secretary Walter White.<sup>15</sup>

Baker encountered similar problems with SCLC: its hierarchical structure mirrored that of the church, with one front man to inspire and be obeyed. King shared comparable beliefs about leadership, as he had told his Dexter Avenue Baptist Church congregation in 1954: "[T]he pastor's authority stems from the people themselves. Implied in the call is the unconditional willingness of the people to accept the pastor's leadership." Accordingly King desired SCLC to be a cross-over leadership-model from churches into politics, with a one-man show around his persona—earning King the nickname "the Lawd" from SNCC-workers. Whenever King spoke somewhere, his chief aide Ralph Abernathy often introduced him by shouting: "He is the leader! He is the Moses!" Such ego glorification troubled King at times, as he wrote in 1960: "I have no Messiah complex, and I know that we need many leaders to do the job." But he rarely stopped it and occasionally even expected it. Being power icons in their own church communities, King's colleagues were also forceful personalities and therefore often resented the fact that King received the credit for their joint efforts. According to SCLC-historian David Garrow, "ego was seen by most SCLCers as the primary factor in their regular battling." Therefore, Charles Payne wrote, in Baker's eyes "SCLC's internal culture could be frustratingly disorganized" whereas "the NAACP had at least been a disciplined, tightly run ship, dependent on no one personality."<sup>16</sup>

Baker had planned to leave the organization long before Walker's appointment; her position had always been defined as 'acting' rather than permanent. Within movement folklore, however, her decision to leave SCLC—and other organizations—is explained by her overall belief that "organizational loyalties could transplant ideals." SNCC later adopted her notion of not believing in the longevity of organizations (an apt organizer should work oneself out of a job) as a rationale for developing local leadership. While this narrative has merits, Baker's resignations reflected not only her ideals, but also her distinct character and lifelong discomfort with structure, gender, or class constraints. While advocating everyone's personal worth, she was unable to overcome her own resentment toward the male leaders of the NAACP and SCLC. Garrow noted that SCLC's ministers "thought Baker was haughty and aloof" with "a disdain for anyone who was a black male preacher." While the accusations of sexism in these organizations are not in dispute, other female members, like Septima Clark, Dorothy Cotton, and Annell Ponder, were able to function within this context while equally resenting these trends and being equally devoted to grassroots activism. Nonetheless, Barbara Ransby wrote, Baker's "identity as a political vagabond helped her" because she was "perceived as an independent person without vested interests in one faction or another. This earned her enormous credibility with [SNCC]."<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 13; Ransby, *Ella Baker & The Black Freedom Movement*, 64-104, 105-147, 303; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 86; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 33.

<sup>16</sup> Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 115, 558, 801, 898-899; Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 92, 195-197, 286, 552; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 450, 463-464; Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 59; Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 64.

<sup>17</sup> Ransby, *Ella Baker & The Black Freedom Movement*, 281; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 118.

In SNCC, Baker finally found an organization that seemed more open to her ideas. Many SNCC-workers desired to stay independent and Baker encouraged these views in Raleigh. She also advised to avoid basing leadership on status—social, financial, or intellectual—and “to avoid struggles for personal leadership.” Her suggestions chimed with advice the students received from others as well as their own inclinations. Pre-conference letters show that activists like Douglas Moore and Glenn Smiley also believed that in Raleigh adults should “speak only when asked to do so.” In her conference speech Baker acknowledged that the students were already “[inclined] toward group-centered leadership” and “intolerant of anything that smacked of manipulation or domination.” According to Ransby, she “never professed to having created SNCC’s ideology; rather, she identified and nourished the radical democratic tendencies apparent in the thinking of many” attracted to SNCC.<sup>18</sup>

The Nashville group, for example, followed Old Left-icton Myles Horton’s lessons on internal democracy. With Jim Dombrowski and Don West, he had co-founded Highlander Folk School, a controversial interracial leadership training school for labor and civil rights activists in Monteagle, Tennessee, in the 1930s. It advocated “experiential learning,” that is, SNCC-worker Bob Zellner explained, “learning in the round, with everyone literally sitting in a circle. There were no teachers and no students. All in the circle were both.” Accordingly the Nashville group functioned democratically without dependence on one individual, even an influential figure like James Lawson. It had a rotating chairmanship devoid of any power and a central committee in which a few represented the wishes of the rest, which they wanted SNCC to copy.<sup>19</sup>

That SNCC opted for a loose structure also reflected the institutional background of the students. Resource mobilization scholars have argued that the students’ attitude toward activism grew out of their experience of attending southern black colleges. They typically saw the sit-ins as “integral to their education,” a continuity with the history of the institution they attended. Historian Harry Lefever for instance detected that Atlanta’s black Spelman College students felt that “their actions were consistent with Spelman’s long history as a liberal arts institution,” in which “knowledge is of value only to the extent that it is put into practice.” Simultaneously Spelman ironically helped maintain the status quo. This was because the college, like most black southern educational institutions, relied wholly or partially on white donors, who withdrew their funds if they supported movement activities. The sit-ins underscored this when only a few (private) colleges refused to expel its participants. The sit-ins therefore formed a challenge to these institutions’ “traditional nonpolitical stance” and “the assumption that social changes should occur...only within established legal institutions.”<sup>20</sup>

The students’ inclination towards decentralization thus developed from their own experience as well as outside influences. Although Bob Moses had arrived at similar views through different experiences, when he heard SNCC’s story he was naturally drawn to the students and Baker. At B.B. Beamon’s he and Stembridge therefore eagerly discussed the students’ actions. They agreed that Wyatt Walker’s approach was “too hero-worshipping, media-centered, preacher-dominated, and authoritarian.” They found Baker’s approach much more appealing. In 1982 Moses reflected that he instantly “had a very strong, and a very positive reaction to Ella. I felt that she was someone you could trust. I felt a very deep respect for what she

<sup>18</sup> Ella Baker, interview by John Britton, June 19, 1968, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University; Carson, *In Struggle*, 20; Larry Rubin, ed., *Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary* (Conference Booklet, April 15-18, 2010), 20-21; Ella J. Baker “Bigger Than A Hamburger,” in *The Southern Patriot*, May 1960, in *Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table*, eds. Bond and Lewis, 406-407; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 42; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 131; Ransby, *Ella Baker & The Black Freedom Movement*, 303.

<sup>19</sup> Carson, *In Struggle*, 21; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 35; Lewis and D’Orso, *Walking with the Wind*, 85-86; Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 218; Bob Zellner, *The Wrong Side of Murder Creek* (Montgomery: New South Books, 2008), 101-103.

<sup>20</sup> Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 196; Harry G. Lefever, *Undaunted By The Fight: Spelman College and the Civil Rights Movement, 1957-1967* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2005), 256 and page 2 of the Preface; Oppenheimer, *The Sit-In Movement of 1960*, 39, 44.

had done with her life [and] the position she was taking about King.” Moreover, Moses applauded her role in SNCC: “[I]f a different person had been in her position, it would’ve been extremely difficult to envisage SNCC being set up the way it was, independent of King, because even when I was there in the office, there was still the pressure on the students [to affiliate because] if they had to rely on King for fundraising, then they should be a part of his organization.”<sup>21</sup>

### 3.2. Fitting In

Moses’ frustrations over his and SCLC’s inactivity in Atlanta grew as the weeks went by. “[T]here wasn’t much of anything to be done,” he recalled in 1982, “They were putting out a fundraising letter [and] it looked like they were going to take most of the summer” to get it out. He did this throughout July, but meanwhile his frustration kept building: “I had thought SCLC would have various projects popping up over the South and I could fit into one of these, not so however, and I was back stuffing envelopes.” This could have been tolerable, he reflected, “if it were not that there was...nothing larger cooking.”<sup>22</sup>

Through Stenbridge, Moses learned that plenty *was* boiling because of the Atlanta student movement (ASM) of the historically black Atlanta University Center (AUC). The ASM emerged after students Julian Bond and Lonnie King read about the Greensboro sit-ins. Fearing that Greensboro might become “another isolated incident in black history,” they formed the Committee on Appeal for Human Rights (COAHR) to launch sit-ins themselves. Two-hundred students answered the call on March 15 and commenced a protracted series of sit-ins. It also picketed an A&P store, located nearby the YMCA where Moses stayed, for job discrimination. Like SNCC, its members strongly promoted student autonomy. Being from Atlanta they were unimpressed with local civil rights leaders, including Martin Luther King, Jr. As Julian Bond said in the 1970s: “[N]o man is a prophet in his own hometown.” They had therefore rejected any attempts by black community leaders to control COAHR and SNCC. After all, Bond explained, “we thought, ‘well, if you think what we’re doing is so great, why haven’t you done what we’re doing? You didn’t do it and therefore we’re not going to join with you.’”<sup>23</sup>

The picketing of the A&P store enthralled Moses. He therefore picketed the store “every day because there was nothing else to do” in SCLC. Moreover, notes Moses’ biographer Eric Burner, he picketed the store “not simply on a one-hour shift like most students, but often all day and sometimes alone.” Burner explained this as a conscious decision to “[express] himself by example.” However, rather than being a well thought-out plan by Moses to convert bystanders Camus-style, his one-man action had a much more basic explanation. Despite the ASM’s numbers, no-one else showed up, he critiqued in 1982: “[They] loved to have long meetings, but they didn’t like to walk that long picket line in the heat.” As Julian Bond confessed in 2008: “[Moses] picketed...all day in the hot sun. I didn’t want to do that. But he did.” On occasion, so did Spelman student Ruby Doris Smith.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Moses interview Carson, 1982.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Moses interview Carson, 1982; Julian Bond, “SNCC: What We Did,” (Speech, SNCC’s 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Conference, Shaw University, Raleigh, NC, April 15 2000); Raines, *My Soul is Rested*, 86, 87, 102; Lefever, *Undaunted by the Fight*, 45-46, 48, 51. In *My Soul is Rested*, Bond recalled that after reading about Greensboro in a local drugstore, he commented: “Surely someone here will do it.” Then came, he recalled, “to me, as it came to others in those early days in 1960, a query, an invitation, and a command: “Why don’t we make it happen here?” Instantly, they decided, “You take this side of the drugstore [to recruit students] and I’ll take the other and we’ll call a meeting...for noon today to talk about it.” That day, they “had a meeting of a small group of people, about twenty people. And the next day enlarged it to more and more, and that began the student movement...”

<sup>24</sup> Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 24; Moses interview Carson, 1982; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 10, 1983, Box 108, Taylor Branch Papers; Cynthia Griggs Fleming, *Soon We Will Not Cry: The Liberation of Ruby Doris Smith Robinson* (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 55-56, 60; Moses Robert and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 30; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Anne Romaine, September 1966/November 14, 1987, Anne



Whether or not Moses consciously aligned intellectual theories to his motivation as early as this, he did stand out among the ASM and SNCC-workers. Lacking the ‘credentials’ for credibility in the student movement—one’s accomplishments, arrests, and harassments endured during the sit-ins—he needed to convince the students of his sincerity and commitment. This was not easy. “They were suspicious of me,” Moses recalled in 1982, “wondering what the intentions of this Northerner were.” Because he was so “quiet and intense,” Julian Bond said in 2008, they even believed he might be a Communist spy. After all, he explained, “to us, as in Southerners, this was a foreign idea, Communists. Who were they? We were told these were bad people and they’re going [to trick] us into doing things that we shouldn’t do, and they’re Northerners. [So] here’s [a guy] from New York [who] wants to help us. And we knew why we were doing these things because we lived in the part of the country where segregation was rampant. And he didn’t. So why would he care? So there must be something wrong with him.”<sup>25</sup>

Bond’s explanation exemplified both the students’ lack of political experience and the extent to which their thinking reflected Cold War simplicities. This, Burner argued, “illustrate[d] the generational distance between the early and late 1960s” when the students moved from being “‘good Americans’ who did not yet question the system” to “distrust[ing] liberalism, which promised no solution within the system.” In 1960 most SNCC-related sit-in leaders, like Diane Nash, Charles Sherrod, and Charles Jones, saw “the student movement [as] part of the anticommunist struggle.” Jones even testified to HUAC about his 1959 association with the Seventh World Youth Festival in Vienna. Clayborne Carson described “typical southern black students of the time” as “politically unsophisticated and socially conventional.” The students therefore accepted one AFL-CIO union’s demand to de-invite Bayard Rustin to SNCC’s 1960 October conference in exchange for financial support<sup>26</sup>. Given the fact that Rustin had left the Communist Party twenty years earlier, this decision was remarkable for its timidity. Historian Jeff Woods explained that contemporary Americans “regarded Communism as an even greater evil than southern racism. They found it hypocritical and untenable for movement advocates to defend the civil liberties of American blacks while accepting aid from Communists, whom they...identified with totalitarian restraints on the same liberties.” Bond confirmed most SNCC-workers indeed had “no concept of civil liberties” in 1960. Only Jane Stembridge resigned from SNCC over Rustin’s de-invitation.<sup>27</sup>

The students’ suspicion of Moses also underscored the perceived differences between Northerners and Southerners. Regardless of organizational connections between the regions, politically

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Romaine Papers; Julian Bond, interview by author, October 27, 2008, Washington DC. On average the COAHR students were at least five years younger than Moses, which might have contributed to their lack of determination in comparison to Moses. Nonetheless, 18-year-old Ruby Doris Smith matched his commitment by regularly picketing the A&P by herself. Like Moses, she was, her biographer Cynthia Griggs Fleming stated, an “intensely private and independent person,” who did not seek “any personal notoriety” (Fleming, *Soon We Will Not Cry*, 56, 60).

<sup>25</sup> Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 30; Sellers and Terrell, *The River of No Return*, 41-42; Julian Bond, interview by author, October 27, 2008, Washington DC; King, *Freedom Song*, 145.

<sup>26</sup> Several historians have repeated the story of Rustin’s de-invitation, but none detail the circumstances under which it occurred. The name of the union, and whether it was the union’s national office or one of its locals, which made the demand has never been established, although accounts vary from the United Auto Workers to the United Packing Workers. These are odd, however, considering their own left-wing orientations. The UPWA for instance was an early supporter of the Montgomery bus boycott and SCLC. Its president was a member of King’s ‘kitchen cabinet.’ Moreover, considering Rustin’s altered stance on communism and close relationship with anti-communist A. Philip Randolph at the time, Jane Stembridge was therefore probably correct when, according to Barbara Ransby, “years later she reasoned that it was probably as much Rustin’s sexuality as his leftist past that caused the union to reject him and prompted SNCC not to stand up in his defense,” an issue that Stembridge, who was—silently—struggling with her own sexual identity, could empathize with (Ransby, *Ella Baker & The Black Freedom Movement*, 263).

<sup>27</sup> Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 25-26; Moses interview Carson, 1982; Jeff Woods, *Black Struggle, Red Scare: Segregation and Anti-Communism in the South 1948-1968* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), 9-10; Sellers and Terrell, *The River of No Return*, 43; Ransby, *Ella Baker & The Black Freedom Struggle*, 248, 263; Carson, *In Struggle*, 9; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 219.

inexperienced southern blacks like themselves did not automatically accept Northerners as allies. This foreshadowed the many cultural differences between northern and southern SNCC-workers that troubled the organization throughout its existence. But just as the southern view of Northerners was influenced by regional stereotypes, so was Moses' view of Southerners. He had always interpreted southern blacks as lacking in initiative. He told *The Village Voice* in 1964 that the sit-ins "opened up a whole new world" because before then "I knew nothing about the South except for, like, folk-myths from a few crazy Negroes. My image of the southern Negro was fearful, cringing." This was not uncommon for Northern blacks. Charles McDew, who grew up in Ohio, similarly admitted he had "tended to look down on the South and on the Southern Negro," but within a week after seeing Greensboro, he was transformed and became a student sit-in leader in South Carolina.<sup>28</sup>

The differences between Northern and Southern students were both real *and* perceived. At the Raleigh conference, Baker had let Northerners (who were mostly white) and Southerners (who were overwhelmingly black) meet separately, and emphasized that the Northerners' role was considered supportive. As she explained in 1968: "[I]t wasn't a question of color [but] of retaining the character of a Southern-based movement...[The Northern students] were much more articulate in terms of certain social philosophies than the Southern students [but] they had demonstrated...their capacity for suffering and confrontation to a degree that the Northern students had not." The issue likewise influenced the election of southern black activist Marion Barry as SNCC's first chairman. "By picking Barry to head *their* organization," Cleveland Sellers wrote, "the students were serving notice to Northern whites...that they intended to keep [SNCC] under the control of Southern black students."<sup>29</sup>

To keep himself busy, Moses attended a university lecture on the 'Ramifications of Gödel's Theorem,'<sup>30</sup> where he heard about a picket to support a sit-in at Rich's department store. Moses decided to join it although it was sponsored by the predominantly white organization SCEF (Southern Conference Educational Fund). SCEF was the offshoot of the leftist Southern Conference for Human Welfare (SCHW), organized in 1938 to promote civil rights and labor causes. Its Executive Director, Jim Dombrowski, was also involved in the Highlander Folk School, which had attracted some anti-Communist attention. Activists who dealt with Highlander, like Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King (SCLC took over Highlander's citizenship program), hardly took such accusations seriously because of Highlanders' roots in the 1930s labor movement. However, they were cautious about associating with SCEF. It was considered more controversial because of its open door policy of working with anyone regardless of (past) political associations. A 1947 HUAC report had named SCHW "the most deviously camouflaged Communist-front operation of the day," and even after it disbanded, SCEF, its tax-exempt educational branch, never entirely escaped "the scars of the 1947 report." Moreover, SCEF was run by Carl and Anne Braden, a white couple from Louisville,

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<sup>28</sup> Jack Newfield, "Moses in Mississippi: The Invisible Man Learns his Name," *The Village Voice*, December 3, 1964; Ben H. Bagdikian, "Negro Youth's New March on Dixie," *Saturday Evening Post*, September 8, 1962.

<sup>29</sup> King, *Freedom Song*, 45; Ella Baker, interview by John Britton, June 19, 1968, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University; Sellers and Terrell, *The River of No Return*, 38-39.

<sup>30</sup> The lecture was given by black Muslim and distinguished mathematician Prof. Lonnie Cross at Clark Atlanta University. As a math teacher, philosopher, and language purist, Moses was interested in the Theorem, of which, he characteristically explained to Taylor Branch in a 1983 interview, "there are two of them, one...says that in truth functional logic and certain level of quantificational logic can be complete in the sense that if you think of a body of truths that can be expressed in notational logic, you can then devise a set of axioms which will spew out just those truths and none others...But then Gödel had another theorem...much more complicated. It says that given any set of axioms in a language that is rich enough to describe the truths in elementary arithmetic, you can demonstrate certain truths of elementary arithmetic that cannot be accounted for by those axioms. Which means that the program that mathematicians had sought to try to codify mathematics was dealt a blow." Moses recalled that he later explained the theory to SNCC's Stokely Carmichael (Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 10, 1983, Box 108, Folder 1, Taylor Branch Papers).

Kentucky, suspected of Communist Party membership. After Carl Braden served eight months in prison for buying a home for a black couple in a Louisville white neighborhood in 1954, the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee investigated SCEF and Braden was forced to appear before HUAC.<sup>31</sup>

When Atlanta police arrested the demonstrators, Moses' association with SCEF fuelled the students' suspicions of him. He recalled in 1982 that they held "meetings about me," and eventually "Ruby Doris and Lonnie King called me in" to ask how he had learned about the picket. Convinced that any "hyper-intellectual Yankee" was potentially dangerous, his Theorem answer "hardly reduced their suspicion." They asked if he was a Communist, and then asked Martin Luther King to question him since the newspapers had identified him as 'Robert Moses of SCLC.'<sup>32</sup>

King called Moses to see him at Ebenezer Baptist Church, where he was co-pastor alongside his father. This was their first meeting. Their conversation, Moses recounted in 1982, was awkward with "long silences," yet revealing about the two men's characters and style. King summarized SCEF's history while Moses "sat silently." King and SCLC, however, were still closely related with Highlander and, to some degree, SCEF. In fact, Moses contended, "King wasn't particularly worried about the presence of Communists in the Communism-is-evil-and-going-to-take-over sense. And in this, ironically, he was ahead of many of the students." But the problem was that SCLC was in the middle of a fundraising campaign, so King said: "Robert, I am not saying that SCEF is Communist, but some people think it's Communist and that's what matters. We have to be careful...You understand that, don't you, Robert?" He "then advised me—he didn't order me—not to participate in other SCEF demonstrations."<sup>33</sup>

Historian Taylor Branch noted the degree of "expediency, even hypocrisy" in King's approach. King's writings show he was ambivalent toward Marxism and sympathetic toward Scandinavian-style democratic socialism. However, whenever SCLC's public image was concerned he could be ruthlessly pragmatic. He had recently "purged" Bayard Rustin from SCLC and later broke off relations with Jack O'Dell and Stanley Levison under pressure from the Kennedy administration. Stenbridge told Moses how King and SCLC "were torn between the need for mainstream acceptance and continuing some of the political relationships on the left that had been important to them early on." This was a political reality facing all civil rights organizations. The NAACP and others had adopted anti-Communist resolutions, and officials like Roy Wilkins even cooperated with the FBI about alleged Communists among its rank and file<sup>34</sup>. Although the strength of anti-communism was waning, King's and the students' suspicion of SCEF and Rustin showed that Cold War politics still presented a minefield for civil rights organizations.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 30; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, July 30 1984, Box 108, Folder 1, Taylor Branch Papers; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Anne Romaine, September 1966/November 14, 1987, Anne Romaine Papers; Woods, *Black Struggle, Red Scare*, 29-31, 44-45, 104-105, 107-108, 123-124; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 122.

<sup>32</sup> Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*. Page 30; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 10, 1983, Taylor Branch Papers; Moses interview Carson, 1982; Stenbridge to Forbes, letter, August 10, 1960, File #0918, Reel 4, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files Jane Stenbridge, SNCC Papers.

<sup>33</sup> Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 30-31; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 325, 328-329.

<sup>34</sup> Ironically such organizations thereby weakened their own strength, leaving 'long civil rights' historians to conclude that if it had not been for 'the red scare,' participants in the 'Black Popular Front' could have made the later 1960s movement redundant. Whether anti-communists were truly able to stop or delay the emergence of a mass movement in the late 1950s, however, can be debated. The rupture in activism between the 1930s and the 1960s mostly resulted from (state) terrorism based on racism, especially in the South; anti-communism was but an extra tool. Many of the South's 'little HUAC's,' which investigated communist infiltration in civil rights groups, were far less effective than their Northern counterparts in New York and California. When southern states prosecuted the NAACP—outlawing it in Alabama in 1956 and virtually eliminating its presence everywhere else—they relied upon legal technicalities rather than patently unconstitutional anti-communist laws.

<sup>35</sup> Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 328-329; Biondi, *To Stand and Fight*, 167-170; Arnesen, *Reconsidering the 'Long Civil Rights Movement,'* 32-33; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 31.

As an SCLC-volunteer, Moses said in 1982, he felt “bound to follow its policies.” Moreover, he “was hardly going to argue with him...This was Martin Luther King” and he was just “a young guy come down from Harlem.” To Moses it was a matter of respect resulting from King’s experience and his own lack thereof, rather than being star-stricken by King’s charismatic media personality, which appeared to be absent from the scene altogether. The affair seemed to bother King too. He “was very slow speaking,” which Moses considered “amazing,” because he thought “there was never a time when Dr. King was without melody in his voice.” When Moses became a SNCC leader, he too faced the reality that his public image did not correspond with who he was in private, as King had realized of himself a long time ago. Yet the difference between the two was that King was able to live with and distinguish between the two identities, whereas the purist Moses could and would not.<sup>36</sup>

Moses found it much harder to develop a rapport with King than with Baker, despite their similarities. Although his background was more humble and action-oriented, they were both intellectuals who had attended northern white schools (King attended Pennsylvania’s Crozer Theological Seminary and Boston University) and had traveled abroad (King to Europe, Ghana, and India). Above all, their academic training was similar with exposure to white philosophers like Hegel and Tillich, although King’s was more religiously oriented. King’s philosophy, like that of Moses, was a mishmash of various cosmopolitan and indigenous experiences and studies,<sup>37</sup> but King seemed indifferent to comparing notes. What “struck” Moses from meeting King then was that “he wasn’t that interested in who I was...Not that he was superficial, but the conversation was superficial.” Had his name not been published, he reflected in 1982, “I probably would have never met him.” This contrasted starkly with his talks with Baker: “She asked me about my upbringing, my thoughts on Harlem, my entrance into the movement...Baker was actually talking to me. I felt [it] seemed important enough [for her to make] time for it.”<sup>38</sup>

Baker’s and King’s different styles thereby underlined SNCC’s and SCLC’s organizational cultures. Foreshadowing the recent multitude of academic studies into “the effect of organizational culture on employee participation and morale,” Moses instinctively detected a causal connection between the organizations’ bureaucratic setting and individuals’ ability within them to thrive. While SNCC and Baker taught that “you make a personal connection whenever you really want to do something with somebody else,” in SCLC he found that “a lot of people [had lost]” this ability when “they move[d] up in certain arenas.” Accordingly lower-placed employees’ individual talent was often overlooked in SCLC’s benign autocracy. Moses at least experienced it this way and Baker encouraged this view. In hindsight Moses therefore characterized the King meeting as a missed chance that helped him “understand how the voice of organizers differs from that of leaders”: “[King] wasn’t...trying to say: well here’s someone who has come down to work, how can we really use [him]? [The] mark of [someone] who has an instinct for organizing [is

<sup>36</sup> Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 328; Moses interview Carson, 1982.

<sup>37</sup> King could be considered one of the first ‘cross-over’ priests who successfully combined ‘black’ and ‘white’ Christianity. Generally speaking, ‘white’ Christianity emphasizes the New Testament, its music is often detached and in Latin, and sermons have an intellectual message. In southern ‘black’ Christianity, which had its origins in oral tradition, the Old Testament and mostly the book of Exodus is stressed, the music is participatory, spiritual, and the accent is on emotion. In the sermon prominence is on the creation of a ‘frenzy’; that is, of letting God enter the individual and allowing Him to work through one. As an intellectual, King resented this black fundamentalism, and therefore used both the Old and the New Testament in his sermons, combined with references to academic learning, including Reinhold Niebuhr and Walther Rauschenbusch. He used the Old because blacks identified with Moses and his oppressed but chosen people, and he used the New to incorporate Jesus’ views of nonviolence and redemptive suffering. With the latter inclusion, he helped make the cause for the black struggle more acceptable to whites, who saw their own texts used in a different form (Charles P. Henry, “The Political Philosophies of Martin Luther King, Jr.” (lecture, University of California, Berkeley, Berkeley, CA, August 27, 2003)).

<sup>38</sup> Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 325; Clayborne Carson, ed., *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Warner Books, 1998), 15-16; Ansbro, *The Making of a Mind*, 90, 187; Lewis and D’Orso, *Walking with the Wind*, 303; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 32-33; Moses interview Carson, 1982.

that] you've always got to be on the lookout for people who present themselves as potential organizers. And I don't think...that he [had that] kind of instinct." Neither did many of SCLC's other preachers.<sup>39</sup>

Baker's interest in him came when Moses was still at an impressionable age (25), was uprooted from his family, and had trouble fitting in with the students. They also discovered a personal connection that strengthened Moses' susceptibility to her: the milk co-op he worked for as a child had grown out of the 1930s Harlem-based Young Negroes' Cooperative League. Baker had been its national director. To Moses "it was very helpful and meaningful to find somebody...who was involved in the civil rights movement, that I [was] attracted to, who had also touched on my early life in a way that was very meaningful." After all, "in a sense, I used to joke with her, she helped put the milk on our table." Baker liked him too. She placed "great confidence" in Moses, biographer Barbara Ransby noted, because in him "she saw the makings of the kind of leader she herself had striven to become: modest, principled, and able to empower others through the force of example." Although Baker saw nonviolence solely as a tactic, they were both "deeply attentive to...the ideological implications of certain tactical decisions [and] equally willing to do the messy, hands-on work necessary to implement those ideas."<sup>40</sup>

Because Baker's interest in him motivated him, Moses came to see personal interaction as an organizing tool too. As historian Wesley Hogan wrote, Baker taught him "that no movement could exist without individuals" and that all organizations needed to "care" for them. This tactic matched his reticent nature and ability to listen, which allowed for the other person in a conversation to open up. It also echoed his father's teachings that everybody, however humble or lacking in education, could contribute something worthwhile if given the chance. It was thus a natural approach for Moses to adopt and one that proved useful in his later voter registration work. Stokely Carmichael believed that "Bob's [Mississippi] leadership style was patterned—whether consciously or not—on Ms. Baker's." Julian Bond agreed. In 2008 he illustrated their similarities: "[U]nlike most adults she didn't say 'do this,' [but] 'what would happen if you do this?'...She let us think for ourselves. And although she guided us, she didn't direct us. And that was how he was [too]." This left historian Steven Lawson and others to conclude that Moses "excelled" in "a feminine model of organizing" that complemented his 'masculine' Mississippi field work and bravery. While Moses admitted that Baker's style was indeed "important to the future shape of my work," he noted that she had developed that style during her work with local NAACP branches in the 1940s southern black communities: "[I]f you really want to do something with somebody else [you have to] find out who it is you are working with. All across the South you could see that in grassroots rural people. That was their style. Miss Baker [just] took this style to a sophisticated level of political work."<sup>41</sup>

The daily process of personal interaction also helped the Atlanta students to overcome their suspicions of Moses, although the intervention of two adults accelerated it. Before his departure to Atlanta, Moses related in 1982, his Uncle Bill had asked his friend Carl Holman to "keep an eye out for me." Holman, an AUC professor who published a movement newspaper, vouched for Moses' bona fides after the students had complained to him "about this strange person" at the SCLC office. Moses then moved in with his family, which "cooled down the problems with the students, because he was able to interpret to them who I was." Ella Baker in turn "explained to me about the students...and their lack of

<sup>39</sup> Robert P. Moses, "Forward," in *Delta Time*, Ken Light; Moses interview Carson, 1982; William G. Ouchi and Alan L. Wilkins, "Organizational Culture," *Review of Sociology* (1985): 469.

<sup>40</sup> Ransby, *Ella Baker & The Black Freedom Movement*, 82-91, 193, 250-251, 262.

<sup>41</sup> Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 32; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 42; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Charles Payne, August 1993, in *Debating the Civil Rights Movement*, Lawson and Payne, 186-187; Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*. 305; Julian Bond, interview by author, October 27, 2008, Washington, DC; Lawson, "Freedom Then, Freedom Now," *American Historical Review* 96, No. 2 (April 1991): 469. Wesley Hogan has similarly described Moses' approach as 'womanist' because it depended on the "previously sanctioned social training of females: warmth, empathy, compassion, and an ability to listen." (Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 241).

background, of exposure, and [their inability] to judge or place people that don't fit in a certain type that they're used to."<sup>42</sup>

Coming from Harlem's leftist milieu, Moses asserted, Baker "had no problem at all about working with Carl, or with Anne, or with encouraging the students to work with them." She was good friends with the Bradens herself. In July Stembridge had contacted Anne about meeting her and Baker in Atlanta. In the letter she stressed that SCEF's newspaper, *The Southern Patriot*, "will certainly be on [SNCC's] mailing list." Nonetheless, biographer Ransby nuanced, Baker had an "ambivalent relationship to the communist question." She for instance worked "against the anticommunist McCarran Act [but] served on the [NAACP's] 'watchdog' committee to keep communists out." Furthermore, "she never attacked her communist friends, but she worked with and was surrounded by people who did." Like King, Baker "lean[ed] on the pragmatic side," but eventually realized that "anticommunism had to be fought aggressively." In 1962 she joined the SCEF staff. Moses admired her "about-face," he recalled in 1982: "[T]hat was another thing that impressed me about Ella, because people were really uptight about Carl Braden and SCEF." His interpretation of the Atlanta events "came down along with Ella's, because of the little exposure [to the Old Left I had] in high school." Now that he was wrongfully accused, his nascent outlook on the issue strengthened. In future activism Moses called on the Bradens and Highlander repeatedly. Baker educated the students about the topic too, Moses argued: "[S]he was really a strong force [in] helping them resolve this whole problem about red-baiting."<sup>43</sup>

The Atlanta students' acceptance of him, however, owed most to Moses himself. As Bond explained in 2008: "He worked hard. And we quickly discovered with him, and many, many others, that we should take people on the basis of what they were doing, not on who we thought they were. And if he was willing to do the work we did; in fact, do more of it than we did... we began to see that he was a genuine person, and that our suspicions of him were foolish." Such suspicions were also impractical, as SNCC-worker Charles Sherrod argued: "We were all looking at each other, wondering, 'Which rock are they under?' We wasted months that way before we finally decided to forget it and go after segregation."<sup>44</sup>

The students even came to view what Dave Dennis termed Moses' "very strange background" as an asset. Although he trailed the students in experience of direct action, the older, intellectual Moses had skills most in the ASM did not have. Bond considered him "much more clever than we." Although the students at Raleigh had recommended an identification "with the African struggle" and spoke of civil rights as a human right, he said in 2008 that Moses "had a much broader view of social problems and social concerns than we did. We had tunnel vision...We were convinced that we could knock [segregation] over with little effort and everything would then be okay. Bob Moses, on the other hand, had already begun to project a systematic analysis; not just of the South, but of the country, the world." Characteristically, Moses nonetheless "didn't try to impress it on us. He didn't say, 'Here's what's right, you've been doing this wrong.'" As such, he "stood out because he helped us think about what we were doing, and how we could do it," in the same suggestive manner as Baker. Moreover, Bond noted, "he was a great listener. That made him different...he was reserved and we were not, and he did not party [and carouse] as we did...No wonder we began to wonder if he was a saint."<sup>45</sup>

In this respect Moses resembled James Lawson or Bayard Rustin—both pacifist, older

<sup>42</sup> Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 32; Moses interview Carson, 1982; Lefever, *Undaunted by the Fight*, 105, 107.

<sup>43</sup> Moses interview Carson, 1982; Jane Stembridge to Anne Braden, letter, June 16, 1960, File #1012, Reel 4, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files Jane Stembridge, SNCC Papers; Ransby, *Ella Baker & The Black Freedom Movement*, 10, 234-235.

<sup>44</sup> Julian Bond, interview by author, Washington, D.C., October 27, 2008; Woods, *Black Struggle Red Scare*, 167.

<sup>45</sup> Dave Dennis, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 17 2010; Sellers and Terrell, *The River of No Return*, 41-42, 45; Rubin, ed., *Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary*, 20-21; Bond and Lewis, eds., *Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table*, 412-13; Julian Bond, interview by author, Washington, D.C., October 27, 2008; David Halberstam, *The Children* (New York: Random House, 1998), 403.



intellectuals who had lived in the North, traveled abroad, and with ties to the AFSC—more than he did the southern students. In contrast to the flamboyant Rustin, however, Lawson and Moses were self-effacing. In his workshops, Lawson, like Moses and Baker, emphasized “the importance of listening,” an approach he gathered from “the intellectual tradition of nonviolence that stretched through so many Eastern and Western religions.”<sup>46</sup>

From the start Moses’ involvement in SNCC was therefore dual in nature. Ideologically he and SNCC matched perfectly, which led white liberals to view him, as New Left activist Todd Gitlin said, as “the quintessence of SNCC and its foremost saint.” Yet in reality, his age, geographical background, style, and broader political vision set him apart from the student-activists who came out of the sit-in movement. The extent of his broader vision was reflected in a statement by Cleveland Sellers in his memoir. While the students were content to work in Atlanta, Sellers asserted that even at this early date Moses was arguing that the student movement should “leave the urban centers of the South” and “move into rural areas.” This would not only eliminate competition with other organizations, but also provide “assistance for rural blacks” whom no-one was helping.<sup>47</sup>

Meanwhile SCLC’s fundraising letter still needed to get out, but Moses consistently met a wall of bureaucratic regulations. “I’d been saying to let me take over this job New York-style, round up some people, and get the mailing out in a couple of days. I wanted to do it at [the YMCA] where I was staying. But I kept being told that leaving the office...was against the rules,” he explained in 1982. The meeting with King then provided an opportunity to settle the matter. He outlined his plan and after King consented, he and Stembridge recruited several students and YMCA personnel and three days later “the mail was gone.” In return Moses helped Stembridge with her activities, including spreading protest letters and contacting Congressmen. On August 10 she wrote that the “SNCC office, with the help of Bob Moses...has really been producing.”<sup>48</sup>

The mailing-incident underlines how SCLC’s bureaucratized but inefficient organizational culture stifled Moses’ talents. Stembridge documented in August that he “has not been appreciated as he should have been,” which left Moses thoroughly disappointed. He said in 1982 he now “knew” for sure that SCLC’s orientation was not “seeking and utilizing a work force,” and now the mailing was gone it had “no more work” for him. In contrast, the ASM was organizing city-wide “kneel-ins” that challenged segregated churches to invite blacks into their services. Stembridge even reported that “Atlanta is red hot because of the ‘kneel-ins’! We may not be able to do any office work for answering the calls from the press.” Nonetheless Moses, likely questioning the kneel-ins’ long-term impact, was “anxious to get out of the Atlanta scene.”<sup>49</sup>

### 3.3. The Cotton Curtain

Moses chance came after SNCC held a small meeting in Atlanta on August 5. SNCC’s newspaper, *The Student Voice*, lists Moses, Baker, and Martin Luther King as “observers present,” which gave Moses the opportunity “to get a sense of [other] people involved in the SNCC structure.” The conclave decided to hold a conference in October to further define SNCC’s objectives. Following Baker’s view “that linking

<sup>46</sup> Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 20, 24.

<sup>47</sup> Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 148; Sellers and Terrell, *The River of No Return*, 42.

<sup>48</sup> Moses interview Carson, 1982; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 31; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 328; Jane Stembridge to Committee Members SNCC, letter, August 10, 1960, File #0918, Reel 4, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files Jane Stembridge, SNCC Papers.

<sup>49</sup> Moses interview Carson, 1982; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 10, 1983, Taylor Branch Papers; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 35; Stembridge to Committee Members SNCC, letter, August 10, 1960, File #0919, to David Forbes, letter, August 14, 1960, File #0810, and to Bob Moses, letter, August 21, 1960, File #0832, Reel 4, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files Jane Stembridge, SNCC Papers.

people who were interested in social change, but existed in isolation, could speed its progression,” it aimed to involve as many movement representatives as possible in October. The sit-ins, however, had barely touched the Deep South, leaving SNCC with few contacts there. Stemberge therefore asked Moses to go there to gather names as SNCC’s first “field representative.” Moses was immediately excited. With a list of contacts that Baker provided, Moses toured the Deep South for three weeks by bus: first to Talladega and Birmingham in Alabama, then to Clarksdale, Cleveland, and Jackson in Mississippi, followed by Alexandria, New Orleans, and Shreveport in Louisiana. He returned through Mississippi’s Gulfport and Biloxi, and Mobile, Alabama. Since SNCC lacked funds, he paid for the trip from his personal savings.<sup>50</sup>

Ella Baker strongly encouraged Moses to take this trip. In Moses’ words, she “knew I was disgruntled,” but she also wanted him to experience what she had experienced. Practically all the contacts she gave him were local activists she had met during her 1940s travels and her years with SCLC. As her biographer wrote, she wished to “pull the students away” from their campuses and link them up with “a set of elders who represented a different class background and political orientation” than SCLC’s ministers, and she “knew” that Moses would see its merits.<sup>51</sup>

Moses’ trip, however, astonished the students of SNCC. The idea of *voluntarily* entering “the belly of the beast” was something novel, particularly by a person without experience in southern formal and informal racial customs. Although aware of Mississippi’s reputation, Moses admitted that his Northern background eased his decision: “I didn’t know enough to be afraid.” Stemberge wrote Moses she had “trouble sleeping for [being] worried about you” and considered him “my hero.” Simultaneously she and Moses joked about his enterprise. In one letter she teasingly wrote she “was getting a Messiah complex” about him and awaited his “return from the land of bondage.” Moses cunningly replied that indeed “Jehovah’s witness just came: The Kingdom of God is at hand.” In 2008 Julian Bond recalled his disbelief in Moses’ venture as well: “[Moses] was willing to do things that we weren’t always willing to do ourselves, but we knew needed to be done. When he agreed to go on this trip to *Mississippi*... I’d never been to Mississippi. And I didn’t *want* to go to Mississippi” due to its “terrible reputation.” Moreover, “he went on a *bus*. I hated to ride buses. I didn’t ride buses in the city, let alone from country to country.”<sup>52</sup>

Moses soon discovered why. When he boarded the bus to Alabama on August 13, he needed to decide where to sit<sup>53</sup>. He felt “forced to freedom ride,” that is, sit in the white section of the bus, since “I was now representing the sit-in movement...Ella, Jane, and Connie stood there watching to see where I would sit.” Yet he “had feelings about doing that,” because “if I get stopped, then I’m not going to get this trip accomplished.” He sat in front until the Georgia border. Shortly after highway patrolmen stopped

<sup>50</sup> Moses interview Carson, 1982; “Oct. Conference,” in *The Student Voice*, August 1960, in *The Student Voice, 1960-1965: The Periodical of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, ed. Clayborne Carson (Westport CT: Meckler Corporation, 1990), 6; “Announcements Sent to Following,” report, July 25, 1960, File #0044, and Jane Stemberge to Bob Moses, letter, July 25, 1960, File #0048, Reel 1, Series I, Marion Barry Chairman Files, SNCC Papers; King, *Freedom Song*, 65-66; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 36-37; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 329; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 10, 1983, Taylor Branch Papers; Joanne Grant, *Ella Baker: Freedom Bound* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1998), 134.

<sup>51</sup> David Dennis, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 17, 2010; Ransby, *Ella Baker & The Black Freedom Movement*, 252, 261-262.

<sup>52</sup> Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 20, 38; Stemberge to Moses, letters, August 16 and 25, 1960, Files #0816 and #0835-0836, and Moses to Stemberge, letters, no date, Files #0836-0837, Reel 4, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files Jane Stemberge, SNCC Papers; Julian Bond, interview by author, Washington, DC, October 27, 2008.

<sup>53</sup> On southern busses blacks, regardless of their community status, faced discriminatory practices: at the terminals and inside where they, by law, were required to sit in the back. If it was crowded they were forced to give up their seat to any white passenger. If the “colored section” was full, but there were seats in the “white section,” blacks had to stand, although they provided most of the bus companies’ income. Southern activists therefore targeted buses from early on, like the 1906 Nashville and 1953 Baton Rouge bus boycotts. Key persons from Baton Rouge, like Rev. Jemison, assisted the more well-known Montgomery one in 1955. SNCC’s first major direct action campaign, the Freedom Rides of 1961, also targeted segregated bus travel.

the bus following reports about a black rider in the front. Troopers got on, but soon left, Moses recalled, because they “couldn’t tell who [had been in front]; in the back mine was just another indistinguishable face among the Black folk.” Later in Clarksdale, Mississippi, local activist Aaron Henry and a few students who escorted him to the bus also “wanted to see where I was going to sit” since “I was representing the sit-in movement, SNCC, and this new wave.” He sat in front until Cleveland without difficulties. When he left for Shreveport, Louisiana, an African already sat in front of a white man, so Moses took the next available seat to a white. Near Monroe, Louisiana, police stopped the bus and asked them to get off. Being even more unfamiliar with southern law, the police’s actions confused the African. They were in turn confused by his African and Moses’ American passport, which he had from his trips overseas, since most blacks never owned one. They let them go after shifting all the passengers around so “no Black folks were riding in front of or next to any white.”<sup>54</sup>

These incidents illuminate Moses’ state of mind and activist approach at this time. First, they demonstrate his audacity, which formed an important aspect of the legend created around him. Second, they reveal his first awareness of representing an image, which he felt he needed to live up to. Third, they again confirm that he did not oppose direct action. Nevertheless, although nonviolent direct action performed an important liberating function, he now realized that its effect was only temporary; for the goal of creating long-term communication networks across the South it provided no value. He also concluded that his job was not served by attracting attention to himself. True to himself, for most of the trip he sat in the back: “I didn’t mind shifting gears when I left Atlanta. I had no intention of flaunting anything, and had no need to. I was sure of myself in that way...I understood [where] SNCC folk were coming from and I didn’t want to [argue] with them. And I knew this job...needed someone who was going to merge with the people. I was going to figure out how to do that[,] get the names and come back out.”<sup>55</sup>

Moses’ itinerary was flexible. Stembridge sent a letter every few days to a local activist requesting accommodation for him. For example, she asked Birmingham’s Fred Shuttlesworth and Jesse Walker to “help Bob in his efforts to meet students and to plan the rest of the trip.” She wrote Mississippi worker Amzie Moore that SNCC “would appreciate your aiding [Moses] in meeting people and in suggesting places in the state where he might be able to talk with students” because SNCC had “no delegate and no correspondence from Mississippi to date.” Occasionally his contacts steered him to places outside his original itinerary, such as Mobile, Alabama, and Augusta, Georgia. He consequently experienced the idea of the “extended family” firsthand. This concept dates back to slavery when black families were constantly threatened with the sale of one or more of their members. To survive, the nuclear family was strengthened by an informal system in which the slave community forged bonds of kinship with and looked after one another. Remnants of this were still visible in black communities across the South and elsewhere in the 1960s. Moses and others in SNCC later learnt to use that extensively as a means of producing social change. Often their physical survival depended on it as well.<sup>56</sup>

The correspondence between Moses and Stembridge during his trip thus provides a fascinating insight into a crucial development in the civil rights movement: how patient networking laid the basis for SNCC’s work in the rural South. Stembridge for instance envisioned in a letter to one grassroots activist how the “future of the movement everywhere depends on consolidated efforts. If the entire state of Louisiana is covered with a strong web of contacts who will write one another, much can be done.” She therefore had high hopes for Moses’ trip, she wrote on August 14: “This could prove to be one of the most important ventures we have undertaken, not only for getting people to the conference, but for the future communication of the movement. I’m really excited.” Some activists Moses met, like Mississippi’s

<sup>54</sup> Moses interview Carson, 1982; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 37-38.

<sup>55</sup> Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 36-37.

<sup>56</sup> Stembridge to Fred Shuttlesworth and to Jesse Walker, letters, August 11, 1960, File #0807, and Stembridge to Amzie Moore, letter, August 15, 1960, File #0811, Reel 4, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files Jane Stembridge, SNCC Papers.

Aaron Henry and Alabama's Joseph Lowery and Fred Shuttlesworth, entered the history books. Others never gained any kind of national renown, like Birmingham's Jesse Walker, Shreveport's Philip Pennywell, or Mississippi activists Irving Dent (Hattiesburg), J.M. Rudd (Batesville), Rev. Brown (Gulfport), Isaac Grey (Vicksburg), and Rev. Redmond (Greenville). Their presence nonetheless intensified Moses' understanding of the wide range of movement activism, its longevity, and its dependence on professional and informal networks—fitting Baker's description of it. Moreover, he discovered that there *were* networks in places like Mississippi, despite their invisibility to professional groups like SNCC.<sup>57</sup>

Moses' trip also revealed his developing organizing skills, creativity, and propensity for hard work. In a 1960 letter Stemberge described how Moses, carrying only a typewriter and SNCC material, usually contacted a student or minister first, explained his purpose, and listened to student reports about their plans. He then asked them to consider setting up a coordinating committee representing all the state's local groups, and each group sending two delegates to SNCC's October Conference. A good example is his stop in Talladega, Alabama, between August 14-16. Reverends Collins and Watts directed him to Talladega College, where he located the Alabama Student Union (ASU), about which Stemberge knew nothing. His letters show he spoke with at least fourteen students and tried "to help them and link them with SNCC" by asking Stemberge to send them SNCC material and suggesting "a field representative here in Alabama...who will follow through on this." He wrote letters introducing SNCC to nearly a dozen ASU associates and initiated negotiations with Talladega College for an ASU conference to discuss student activism and SNCC's conference. Yet Stemberge emphasized to ASU-contact Beverly Moore that "it will definitely be the responsibility of each state to contact its own protest leaders and see that each [protest area is] represented at the [October meeting]." Moses also advocated own accountability for financial assistance. Stemberge wrote Moses: "Great idea to leave it up to the students as much as they can do... like trying to get [money] through Shuttlesworth." Moses got one female agricultural extension worker "to help parley information to the rural areas," an activity he hoped the ASU could take over once it got going. This again shows that Moses' mind was already focused on the southern rural counties. It also demonstrated the importance of an "underground" network, as the lady in question, he wrote, "can't be connected with any organization" because of its attached dangers. Moses explained that "she will pick up mail and news" via Rev. Watts, and instructed Stemberge not to "use her name on the envelope" or "use the [SNCC] stamp when mailing...any of these folks."<sup>58</sup>

Moses went to Birmingham next. A hot-bed of grassroots activism and racial antagonism, Birmingham was notorious for its—often literally—explosive racial situation. Here he discovered just how dangerous the Deep South was, he recalled in 1982: "[Fred Shuttlesworth] was besieged at that time... They had guards around the churches where they were meeting; they were carrying guns. There was just an enormous amount of pressure on Shuttlesworth." This was likely Moses' first indication that in Deep South activism, nonviolent tactics and self-defense generally went hand in hand. He also found a local activist who published pamphlets about Birmingham's many bombings directed at blacks: "[H]e was doing a one-man organizing job...trying to [release] hard-core information about [the bombings], so I sent some of these back" to SNCC, which he did with all material and contacts he discovered. Moses did not remain in Birmingham long, but the experience left an impression: "As I moved through, I could see that the South was not the same everywhere. Birmingham, Alabama, belching smoke and fire from surrounding steel plants, matched no image of the South we held in Harlem." Moreover, he noticed, "white power was

<sup>57</sup> Stemberge to Forbes, letter, August 14, 1960, File #0810, and Stemberge to Philip Pennywell, August 19, 1960, File #0827, Reel 4, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files Jane Stemberge, SNCC Papers. See also the letters Stemberge wrote to Henry, Lowery, Shuttlesworth, and other activists in this network, dated between August 11–September 1, 1960, Files #0804-0808, #0811, and #0827, Reel 4, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files Jane Stemberge, SNCC Papers.

<sup>58</sup> Stemberge to Patricia Drayton, letter, September 1, 1960, File #0847, and Stemberge to Moses, letter, August 18, 1960, File #0819, and Stemberge to Beverly Moore, letter, August 19, 1960, File #0820, and Moses to Stemberge, letters, no date, File #0821 and #0828, Reel 4, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files Jane Stemberge, SNCC Papers.

clearly the dominant power, but every day was not roiled with lynchings. Black folks had a life and I began learning how to enter it.”<sup>59</sup>

With little industry, his next stop, Mississippi, more aptly fitted romantic images of the South: “Low hills dotted with pine and hardscrabble farms rolled through southern Mississippi, then north along the Mississippi River the land flattened dramatically presenting an expansive vista of cotton fields, big plantations, and sharecropper’s shacks.” The latter revealed the state’s deep poverty, the nation’s worst. The dilapidated, wooden shacks often lacked necessary furniture, like beds, indoor heating, and toilets. Over half had no running water. Conditions in one region, the Delta situated in the northwest, were particularly bad. In 1960, 75 percent of Delta families lived below the \$3,000 poverty line due to its extensive sharecropper system, in which farmers lived and worked on a white [cotton] plantation owner’s land in exchange for a part of its proceeds rather than cash. Sharecroppers, seen as wage laborers rather than tenants, had little security. While tenants exercised some control over their property by paying rent, sharecroppers, who paid in labor, could face evictions at a moment’s notice. During the Depression cotton prices fell, which slightly decreased cotton’s centrality in the state’s economy, but in Mississippi’s ten most renowned cotton counties, 94 percent of farmers were either tenants or sharecroppers. One historian noted that in postwar Mississippi almost two-thirds of all black males worked in agriculture; 80 percent of them on white plantations. In 1959 such black farm laborers made \$600 a year in the Delta, while whites earned \$1500.<sup>60</sup>

As James Cobb argued in his classic study, the Delta was “not just a region but a world and a way of life apart,” with a “system of caste-based social control that was rigid, pervasive, and self-perpetuating.” Although Mississippi’s population was 42 percent black in 1960, this number was almost double in the Delta. According to Nicholas Lemann, the region, which included seventeen counties, “was the capital of the sharecropper system—at least in its most extreme form, in which all the sharecroppers were black and lived in self-contained plantation communities...where the conditions were much closer to slavery than to normal employment.” In the sixties the Delta’s black infant mortality rate was “the cutting edge” of the state. One black mother bemoaned the fate of her children who went “to bed hungry and get up hungry and don’t ever know nothing else in between.” The wartime boom and careful manipulation of New Deal money (more than \$450 million between 1933 and 1939) by white planters ensured technological advancements, like automation and tractors. The introduction of the mechanical cotton-picker in 1943 further increased the planters’ wealth—turning the Delta into “a planters’ heaven”—but further reduced unskilled blacks’ prospects and spurred their migration north. In the 1940s, 300,000 blacks left the state. According to John Dittmer, the “‘Delta aristocracy’...dominated the state politically and economically...maintaining its hegemony by exploiting the racial phobias of the poor whites from the hill counties to the east.” Unsurprisingly, Jane Stembridge wrote Moses that she was “very skeptical about what you could find in [Mississippi].”<sup>61</sup>

Due to these realities, Mississippi blacks accordingly had different objectives than the Atlanta students, who were primarily interested in access to segregated public facilities. As Moses explained: “Sure we could go to the desegregated restaurants. But could the Jackson, [Mississippi], Negro who might get fired

<sup>59</sup> Moses interview Carson, 1982; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 38.

<sup>60</sup> Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 38; King, *Freedom Song*, 133-134; Emilye Crosby, *A Little Taste of Freedom: The Black Freedom Struggle in Claiborne County, Mississippi* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 15; Dittmer, *Local People*, 19-20, 125; Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*, 64; James C. Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 254.

<sup>61</sup> Lemann, *The Promised Land*, 11; Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth*, 196-198, 263, 264 (For more on manipulation white planters of New Deal money and the effect of the Depression and technological advancement on Delta blacks, see chapter 8); Dittmer, *Local People*, 10, 19; Moses to Stembridge, letter, no date, 1960, File #0837, and Stembridge to Moses, letter, August 25, 1960, File #0835, Executive Secretary Files Jane Stembridge, SNCC Papers.

for it go there? And how about the Negro who makes fifteen dollars a week?" This logic, however, was not immediately clear to him. He learned to analyze Mississippi's 'peculiar situation' through 49-year-old Amzie Moore of Cleveland. Already known in northern civil rights circles, Moore had a long history of activism in the state, individually and organizationally with the NAACP and the Regional Council of Negro Leadership (RCNL). Between 1942 and 1946 he was in the Army, serving two years in Asia. As with many black soldiers, World War II provided a psychological turnaround for him. The Army's segregationist practices, Moore recalled, "kept [me] wondering, why were we fighting?" Moreover, Japanese propaganda about America's racist practices "simply reminded us daily that there would be no freedom, even after the war." After his return he got a federal job at the post-office and with SCEF money learned to operate a gas-station, which also housed his soon-to-be ex-wife's beauty parlor. This made him part of Mississippi's small black middle class and, being financially independent, he was less likely to suffer economically from white retaliations.<sup>62</sup>

In her letter Stenbridge introduced Moses to Moore as "an extremely perceptive person" with "whom people would be interested to share experiences." Moore, however, was skeptical: "I knew Bob was a graduate from Harvard and...I felt like if a man was educated, there wasn't very much you could tell him." Yet he gave him a chance, Moses said, because "I was coming to him through Ella Baker, whom Amzie knew and respected." Moore then found that "Bob was altogether different. Bob believed me and was willing to work with me. When I found out he was honestly seeking to help...I was willing to help him." Moses was likewise impressed by Moore. In one letter to Stenbridge he pinpointed him as "a key man," and in another called him "the best I've met yet...I would trust him explicitly and implicitly...Plan to be here at least a week to absorb as much as I can from Mr. Amzie Moore!" Yet, he noticed, Moore doubted "whether I was ready for Mississippi and whether I was reliable." Facing a boycott from Delta whites for refusing to put 'white' and 'colored' signs up near the entrances and toilets of his gas station, Moore "was certain that any night he could expect white mob violence." Moses remembered he often fell asleep at his (brick) house with Moore sitting "in his rear bedroom window, rifle at the ready and floodlights washing across his backyard." In the 1970s Moore recalled he was "constantly threatened. I was called at night and told, 'In five minutes, your house gon' blow up.' If I'd run out, I coulda been shot, and if I had stayed in, I coulda been blown to pieces...I've got to [instantly] decide to stay in the house or run out." According to historians Seth Cagin and Philip Dray, Moore "warned Moses that he, too...was surely being watched."<sup>63</sup>

To assess Moses' reliability Moore did a 'reading' of him, like Gregory Moses had done with the people in his Harlem network. This was an old trick, Moses explained, "characteristic of people who are living on the margins and are not beat-up or debilitated. In places like the Mississippi Delta...your life depends on being able to read people." This was also partly what Baker meant with 'find out who you are working with.' Moore did this for instance by letting Moses speak to church congregations, "to see how I was going to talk about this movement I was representing, how I was going to relate to people and how they were going to relate to me." His experience with street preaching and the Intervarsity Christian Fellowship now came in handy. Moses recalled: "I developed kind of a stock message: 'There's something coming. Get ready. It's inevitably coming your way whether you like it or not. It sent me to tell you that.'" Apparently it worked, because, Moses proudly stated, "I got a few 'amens' too." Still, he said, "little did I anticipate that it was coming the way it came and so dramatically [and] so soon."<sup>64</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 29; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 280-281; Moses interview Carson, 1982; Bob Moses, "Comments" (Conference on Ethics and Morality, Washington, D.C., February 3, 1980).

<sup>63</sup> Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), 141; Stenbridge to Moore, letter, August 15, 1960, File #0811, and Moses to Stenbridge, letters, no date, Files #0883, #0833, and #0834, Reel 4, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files Jane Stenbridge, SNCC Papers; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 38-39; Raines, *My Soul Is Rested*, 236; Cagin and Dray, *We Are Not Afraid*, 136-137.

<sup>64</sup> Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 40-41; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Anne Romaine, September 1966/November 14, 1987, Anne Romaine Papers.



Moore took Moses around the Delta to meet other locals and introduce him to the region's past. In doing so, Moses reflected in 1993, "Amzie [did] for me what my father [had done,] analyzing and laying out this...cast of characters across the state and really bringing me in on...who are the players and how to work with them." Yet his father and Moore differed in two respects. First, "Amzie was engaged and tested in the roughest of political waters where there was a level of danger that did not exist in Harlem. My father lacked this exposure." Second, "Amzie's range of contacts was wider than Pop's; he was more at ease with political ideas. Like Pop, Amzie had no college education [but] Amzie had no sense of being incapacitated intellectually or unable to understand and explore any concept in the broad world of politics, culture, history, and race. Ideas simply didn't intimidate him and I found conversation with him invigorating and liberating." Moses later called him his "father in the movement." Moore illustrated to him Ella Baker's ideas about leadership, making real what had formerly been abstract. As Moses put it, "Amzie provided... some flesh and bones to Ella's story...You couldn't experience what Ella was talking about [because] she wasn't in a community. She was operating in this network world."<sup>65</sup>

After talking about "how to improve the economy of the families" and the "illiterate problems we had [and] what to do about houses that had no windows, smoked inside, had leaks," Moore showed Moses a booklet from the Southern Regional Council. It revealed that only 5 percent of Mississippi blacks was registered to vote, and only a quarter of them actually exercised that right. Moreover, in five of the thirteen counties with a fifty percent black populace, no blacks were registered at all. To Moses this "was an eye-opener," he said in 2001, because "I had never [translated this to] what the number of Blacks and their percentage to whites meant in terms of say voting, and electing people." This was ironic: "I had been sitting up hearing about oppression behind the *iron* curtain and the meaning of the vote for freedom all through my college years...without knowing about the Delta and its congressional district with a Black majority. I had not made the connection to the denial of the right to vote behind the *cotton* curtain. Like the sit-ins, Amzie's words slammed into me powerfully." This had unforeseen consequences, Moses asserted: "[Amzie] wasn't distracted at all about integration of public facilities. It was a good thing, but it was not going straight to the heart of what was the trouble in Mississippi. Somehow, in following his guidance there, we stumbled on the key—the right to vote and the political action that ensued."<sup>66</sup>

Moses and Moore taped a map of Mississippi to the wall and while Moore talked about Delta life, Moses typed a draft of a voter registration project for SNCC's conference. The plan entailed citizenship classes during winter and spring to be held in the Catholic mission of Mound Bayou run by black activist Father John LaBauve,<sup>67</sup> with the help of about three students who could live at Moore's house, and more during the summer of 1961, including Moses himself. When Moses described the project to Stembridge in a letter, it had nearly magical proportions: "The most promising thing we've been able to cook up is a voter registration program...The idea is to tackle the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Congressional districts, about 25 counties in all...The main thrust is to take place next summer; we need to round up 100 strong men and women... at least 25 cars and several buses and money for gas and oil." Classes would "serve upwards of 200,000 people." Moses gushed: "Nobody [is] stary eyed, these are nasty jobs but we're going to find some nasty people to do them, so put me down 'cause I'm not only getting mean I'm getting downright nasty... 'cause I don't intend to be in this business all my life." This illustrated how Moses was already thinking 'big'

<sup>65</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by Charles Payne, August 1993, in *Debating the Civil Rights Movement*, Lawson and Payne, 182-183, 185-186; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 40-41; Bob Moses, "Comments" (Conference on Ethics and Morality, Washington, D.C., February 3, 1980).

<sup>66</sup> Amzie Moore, interview by Michael Garvey, March 29 and April 13, 1977, transcript, Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi Collection, University of Southern Mississippi; Cagin and Dray, *We Are Not Afraid*, 134-135; Moses interview Carson, 1982; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 41-42; Hampton and Fayer, *Voices of Freedom*, 140.

<sup>67</sup> In several letters and documents written by Bob Moses and Amzie Moore mention is made of Father LaBauve. However, his name has been spelled differently, ranging from "LaBauve" to "LeBouve" and even "LeBouvre."

along the lines of concentrating (political) power in one area. Stembridge's excitement overflowed too: "I cannot believe your letters...I got so excited that things almost happened to my kidneys. This VOTER REGISTRATION project is IT! Bob, this is what you were looking for!" She promised to "work my fingers off" to assist it. On September 1 she wrote Moore: "The worth of the project is unquestioned...This could be the most significant undertaking of those fighting for freedom" in Mississippi.<sup>68</sup>

While the project never materialized in the manner and time span Moses and Moore envisaged, the plan's content reveals noteworthy insights into issues of (dis)continuity in civil rights activism, especially the relationship between grassroots leadership and outside help. First, it was modeled on past activity, as Moore and LaBauve had already experimented with a citizenship school a few years earlier. Simultaneously the plan used the 'new' emphasis on nonviolence and redemptive suffering. It mentioned that blacks "must regain their self-respect and self-reliance. This can be done by teaching people the philosophy of nonviolence" and "how to willingly accept suffering." It underscored that "these things must be taught before a voter registration program in the Delta can be successful." This input likely comes from Moses, who identified with such principles, rather than Moore, who carried guns everywhere. The tenets of nonviolence were never an integral part of the southern rural movement, and, as such, Moses later learned, its usefulness was questioned throughout.<sup>69</sup>

Second, the means to realize the plan were ambiguous. On the one hand it depended heavily on local organizers to ensure housing and the voting school's location. Moses believed in this type of ownership, meaning that, like the ASU conference, the project should be locals' own responsibility because only this guaranteed their continued involvement. Also, this meant the project was less visible to outsiders, which decreased the possibility of white retaliation. He wrote Stembridge that "whoever wants to give QUIET help [is] welcome! The thing to do seems to be to get the people to come in here, to contact [locals] quietly and by word of mouth as much as possible, to get quiet money wherever possible and forget about all the other machinations machined by machiners." With the latter he meant any professionalized, bureaucratized means of organizing, as displayed by existing organizations. To double-check, Stembridge asked if "SLC should be kept all the way out of this deal[?]...I do." Representing an early example of the two organizations' future turf battle, Moses insisted "the project will be SNCC's."<sup>70</sup>

On the other hand, by insisting that the project was "SNCC's with whoever" willing to help, Moses and Moore accepted that fulltime help was needed and in larger numbers than in the past. Moses wrote Stembridge: "Amzie thinks, and I concur, the adults here will back the young folks but will never initiate a program strong enough to do what needs to be done." Moore even *pressed* the issue of outside involvement, Moses claimed: "[Amzie] thought it fine for young folks from Mississippi to go to the October conference...but more important, he thought, young people—'SNCCers' from other parts of the South—needed to begin planning to come *into* Mississippi." Both realized the project needed inside *and* outside sponsors as well. Committing SNCC's assistance, Stembridge wrote Moore: "[W]e can handle the printing and mimeographing" of 200,000 copies of the Mississippi Constitution, 1,000 affidavits, and 1,000 sample ballots for the classes. She promised to "[line] up some 100 students to work throughout next summer on this project." Moses also proposed to organize a conference at Mississippi's Campbell College, because, he wrote Stembridge, it "seems vital to bring to the students here a sense of being apart of a large movement and assurance of strong outside support about expulsions and bails." Still this project had to be theirs: "We hope that at the [October] SNCC meeting [Mississippi] will be able to form its own organization and work right in on this voter registration project." In Moses' view, however, SNCC

<sup>68</sup> Moses to Stembridge, letter, no date, 1960, File #0835, and Stembridge to Moses, letter, August 25, 1960, File #0836, and Stembridge to Moore, letter, September 1, 1960, Files #0847, Reel 4, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files Jane Stembridge, SNCC Papers. See also: Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 330-331.

<sup>69</sup> Cagin and Dray, *We Are Not Afraid*, 137-138.

<sup>70</sup> Moses interview Carson with Moses, 1982; Stembridge to Moses, letter, August 25, 1960, and Moses to Stembridge, no date, File #0836, Reel 4, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files Jane Stembridge, SNCC Papers.

was merely bringing help to expand Moore's and LaBauve's old project: "[While SNCC agreed] to sponsor this and develop it...the actual line which historically developed the project [was that] the motivation for it and the whole conceptualization behind it was coming out of local initiative." It was a quintessential grassroots initiative, but one that needed massive fulltime help. Moses then left Cleveland—with \$50 less for Moore's transportation to the October conference.<sup>71</sup>

After visiting Moore, Moses met Alfred Cook of Tougaloo College and Walter Williams of Jackson State College. As in Talladega, Moses linked them with SNCC through copies of *The Student Voice* for distribution to "key persons" at their colleges and he pressed their students to attend SNCC's conference. After all, Stembridge wrote in August, "the more organization ...between colleges and protest areas, the better prepared Mississippi will be in the future and the more representative will be the Coordinating Committee." Moses also asked Dean Jones of Campbell College to sponsor a meeting there and with Moore planned to "caucus with Medgar Evers," Mississippi's most well-known NAACP activist, for a conference in Jackson. He wrote Stembridge that when he left Mississippi he had gathered "carloads" of people for SNCC's conference, from areas like Greenville, Laurel, Clarksdale, Jackson, Biloxi, and Cleveland, leaving her to conclude that he had done "miracles."<sup>72</sup>

Moses' hard work continued in Louisiana, where he contacted student movements in Shreveport and "ran into a statewide NAACP Youth Conference." Moses attended it as an "observer" and got some participants to recruit students for SNCC's conference. He told Stembridge "to send [SNCC's] newsletter to the folks from Shreveport and the local chapters of the NAACP youth, and ask the state to send names of more local chapter presidents." He got the president of the Alexandria NAACP Youth Council to attend a SNCC meeting in September. Baker had also told Moses to contact NAACP activist C.O. Simpkins in Shreveport—whose house had been bombed by the Ku Klux Klan in 1957—but he was out of town. Simpkins' ideas did impact another young Louisiana activist, Dave Dennis of CORE, Moses' future comrade in Mississippi. Dennis called Simpkins and Jim McCain, another older, local activist, his mentors, who directed him into grassroots organizing and voter registration<sup>73</sup>. McCain was in Florida, but hearing about his organizing views, Moses wrote Stembridge he "would like very much to talk with Jim McCain about [our voter registration] program and have him and Amzie meet." Moore actually spent a month in Louisiana's civil rights hotbed Baton Rouge during September, so there are likely more connections between the early Mississippi and Louisiana grassroots movements.<sup>74</sup>

Moses returned to Atlanta in early September, after stopping in Mobile, Alabama, where he met Joseph Lowery through a Talladega student. Stembridge concluded that Moses had done "more work and a better job than anybody." A general report documented that he had gathered "about 200 new names" with "great possibility for coordination and projects." Stembridge accordingly wrote him: "Bob—

<sup>71</sup> Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 42; Moses to Stembridge, letters, no date, 1960, Files #0835-0836, and Stembridge to Moore, September 1, 1960, Files #0847, Reel 4, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files Jane Stembridge, SNCC Papers; Cagin and Dray, *We Are Not Afraid*, 137; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Anne Romaine, September 1966/November 14, 1987, Anne Romaine Papers. Moore had additionally watched the recent federal government's intervention in voting rights struggles in Tennessee's Fayette and Haywood counties. He therefore likely eyed federal intervention in Mississippi from the outset, too.

<sup>72</sup> Stembridge to Moses, letters, August 18, 1960, File #0819, August 25, 1960, File #0835, and Moses to Stembridge, letters, no date, Files #0837 and #0883, and Stembridge to Alfred Cook and to Walter Williams, letters, August 29, 1960, File # 0839, Reel 4, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files Jane Stembridge, SNCC Papers.

<sup>73</sup> In 2010 Dennis said he believed "that's why Ella Baker sent Bob in" to meet them, too, although "I didn't find this out until much later, that this person C.O. Simpkins [Moses was to visit] was my C.O. Simpkins." (David Dennis, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 17, 2010)

<sup>74</sup> Moses to Stembridge, letters, no date, Files #0837, #0838, and #0882-0885, Reel 4, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files Jane Stembridge, and Stembridge to Patrick Jones, letter, August 31, 1960, File #0753, Reel 3, Series III, Staff Meetings, SNCC Papers; David Dennis, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 17, 2010.

did you know that you have done probably the most significant work since February 1, 1960 when four freshmen... and you know the rest.” Moses was satisfied too: voter registration not only complied with his beliefs about the long-term production of social change, but it was also a tactic in which his self-effacing personality and ability to listen were assets rather than liabilities.<sup>75</sup>

Moses returned to New York in September to finish the final year of his teaching contract. He moved in with Bob Cohen, a white folk singer he had met in June at a three-week folk dance camp in Maine, a hobby Moses had had since attending the high school summer camps. Unlike these, Cohen wrote that the Maine camp was “run by the politically conservative aficionados of folk dance. The campers were a strange mixture of young folkies, older WASPs, [and] anti-communist émigrés from Eastern Europe...Bob was the only black person in the camp but felt comfortable as he bent the knee or kicked out.” Despite the group’s conservatism, the experience had strengthened Moses’ faith in the egalitarian principles of mankind. “We felt in those days,” Cohen described his and Moses’ emotions, “that the ingesting of other people’s cultures strengthened rather than weakened one’s own, causing one to [feel] more in communication with the rest of humanity.” The two rented a flat on the New York West Side with a Jewish man from Michigan and a female folk dancer, and often frequented dance parties. In 1965 Cohen said Moses really enjoyed this: “Bob’s face really lit up when he was folk dancing. He loved it. I remember sometimes we would be coming home late from a party or something, and if Bob had had a good time, he would start dancing down Amsterdam Avenue. He could be very free and gay then.” Moses later introduced these dances to exhausted civil rights workers to lift their spirits. In 2008 Julian Bond underscored how remarkable this was: “For southern black people... well, we don’t folk dance.” Yet this outside influence Moses brought enriched their lives, Bond claimed: “I can remember us folk dancing and square dancing...we enjoyed it and it seemed like, ‘Why haven’t we been doing this all along?’ you know, ‘Why have people kept this from us?’”<sup>76</sup>

Despite the gaiety Moses’ mind remained fixed on Mississippi throughout the school year. Cohen characterized Moses as being “extraordinarily quiet, gentle, abstract....really involved with his students and reading a lot—Bertrand Russell and Camus in French...Yet, I always had the sense he was very busy in his head all the time.” Busy he was indeed. Moses studied the Mississippi constitution, its voter registration regulations, state maps, and voting statistics. He also nurtured his interest in pacifism. One member of the New York branch of the Fellowship of Reconciliation wrote Stembridge on October 1 that he “had dinner with Bob Moses yesterday—a hell of a nice guy—and a new FOR member!” During winter Moses heard James Lawson speak in New York, and found that Lawson’s “thoughts along those lines were much more developed than mine.” Moses and Moore kept each other updated on the voting project too. In a December letter Moore told Moses that he had received a \$100 check, which he wanted to place “on an old building to be used for the school.” LaBaue’s building was no longer available because he was “moved by the Bishop from Mound Bayou” due to his activism. Pushing the need for outside help, Moore pressed Moses on whether “I [can] still count on your organization to get the copies of the Constitution of Mississippi for the class?” Moses also sent Moore money to fix his car and again for Christmas.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Stembridge to Moses, letters, August 16 and 25, 1960, Files #0816 and #0835, Reel 4, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files Jane Stembridge, and “General Report Since August 1, 1960,” no date, File #0752, Reel 3, Series III, Staff Meetings, SNCC Papers.

<sup>76</sup> Bob Cohen, “Sorrow Songs, Faith Songs, Freedom Songs: The Mississippi Caravan of Music in the Summer of ‘64,” in *Freedom Is A Constant Struggle: An Anthology of the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement*, ed. Susie Erenrich (Montgomery, AL: Black Belt Press, 1999), 178; Moses interview Carson, 1982; Newfield, *A Prophetic Minority*, 73; Julian Bond, interview by author, Washington, DC, October 27, 2008; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 16.

<sup>77</sup> Newfield, *A Prophetic Minority*, 73; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 11, 1983, Taylor Branch Papers; Anonymous FOR member to Stembridge, letter, October 1, 1960, File #0499, Reel 11, Series V, SNCC Conferences, SNCC Papers; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Anne Romaine, September 1966/November 14, 1987, Anne Romaine Papers; Amzie Moore to Bob Moses, letter, December 22, 1960, Box 1, Folder 2, Amzie Moore Papers,

To friends, family, and colleagues, Moses said nothing about his plans. He remained isolated from organized civil rights activities: "Once during the year I met with Jane. She came up from Atlanta. But otherwise I didn't have any real contact with SNCC people." Stenbridge had meanwhile resigned from SNCC (but returned as a Mississippi volunteer in 1963) over Rustin's de-invitation to SNCC's October conference, a position with which Moses, according to historians Cagin and Dray, sympathized. She was replaced by Edward (Ed) King,<sup>78</sup> whom Moses did not know. He did not attend the October conference. "Basically," he later said, "I stayed pretty close to home, and tried to save some money to go back." Cohen stated in 1965 that "the only hint I got of a deep feeling he had about [this] was that he would sit for hours and listen to a record of Odetta singing, 'I'm going back to the Red Clay County.'" In a March 11, 1961, letter to Ed King, Moses wrote that he did follow "events from the far" and that he "would be glad to spend two or three years" in a southern project. King replied asking "concrete details about the Mississippi Project for this summer...SNCC [is] quite interested in doing whatever we can to see that the program goes over." In its April/May 1961 issue *The Student Voice* indeed announced the project, asking students to enlist for "work in the Delta region on Voter Registration drives. The project will begin July 1<sup>st</sup> and will run through September. You are needed to set up an office, to collect affidavits of denial of registration rights, to file these with the Justice [Department and] teach reading and writing to prospective voters." While some white liberals depicted Moses' return to Mississippi in 1961 as a seemingly spontaneous "existentialist act," it in fact was not. If he went, Moore had taught him, he was going well-prepared.<sup>79</sup>

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Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.

<sup>78</sup> No relation with either Martin Luther King or Mary King.

<sup>79</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by Anne Romaine, September 1966/November 14, 1987, Anne Romaine Papers; Moses interview Carson, 1982; Moses to Ed King, letter, March 11, 1961, and King to Moses, March 13, 1961, Box 108, Folder 3, Taylor Branch Papers; Newfield, *A Prophetic Minority*, 73; Cagin and Dray, *We Are Not Afraid*, 138-139; "Attention! Join Our Own Peace Corps of the South," in *The Student Voice*, April/May, 1961, in *The Student Voice*, ed. Carson, 44.





## 4. From A Stone The Builders Rejected

### 4.1. Mississippi of Harlem Nightmares

Moses' first campaign in McComb, Mississippi, has gained an almost mythical quality in movement history. White liberals heralded Moses' "existentialist act," and historians argued, as one put it, that it "shaped the public perception of the early SNCC" as a "kind of priest who chose to isolate himself deep behind the lines of segregation for years at a time, armed only with nonviolence." The project symbolized what film director Phil Alden Robinson called a "microcosm of the overall movement experience" of early 1960s' Deep South organizing. All its ingredients were there: courageous individual and collective acts by outside activists and local people; white opposition leading to violence; slow organizing combined with direct action; nonviolence and self-defense; internal strife; and an ambivalent federal government. On a deeper level it also represents such a microcosm in terms of interaction between fulltime activists and local people, the benefits and drawbacks of SNCC's organizational culture, and Moses' understanding of organizational leadership, which now reached maturity as he discovered what organizing on the ground in Mississippi meant in practice.<sup>1</sup>

In mid-1961 Moses returned to Amzie Moore. Having researched Mississippi throughout the year—a sophisticated organizing approach that anticipated SNCC's Research Department—he was energized to start. Prospects for their voter registration program, however, turned suddenly bleak. Moore had attended SNCC's October conference, but reactions had been lukewarm: many in SNCC believed voter registration was less important than direct action. In January Moore wrote that he was "trying to do as much as is possible" to get the "voting program started again," but LaBauve's forced transfer had added to his difficulties. Moore also told Moses they were "not ready yet" because they still lacked funds, equipment, and meeting space. But Moses felt "there were perhaps other layers of meaning in this statement." While no documentation exists that fully explains Moore's reluctance, Moses figured that fear had stifled locals' commitment. In 1982 he recalled how "a steady stream of people" from the Delta moved "in and out of his home" to discuss with Moore "what to do, and when." They likely communicated that now was not the right time: the past year's civil rights activism, executed largely by SNCC, had fueled racial tensions everywhere. Although Moses did not detect "any indication...that he had been called," Moore might also have experienced difficulty with the national NAACP, which apprehensively watched all SNCC activity. Moore, Moses said in 1983, "was the only one" willing "to break with the NAACP on SNCC. That was Amzie's greatness, because he really believed that the students were gonna do this thing."<sup>2</sup>

Moore's openness to SNCC reflected Mississippi's precarious movement history. The NAACP had been active since 1918, albeit largely secretive. Organized activism grew between the 1930s to 1950s, spurred by the economic and social transformations wrought by the Depression, New Deal, and World War II. Middle-class blacks like Moore, Aaron Henry, Medgar Evers, and T.R.M. Howard toiled to cultivate this new political terrain, although pragmatics forced most to play within the 'separate-but-equal' realm. Subsequently new organizations, like the Regional Council of Negro Leadership (RCNL)

<sup>1</sup> Newfield, *A Prophetic Minority*, 73; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 519; Phil Alden Robinson, telephone interview by author, April 30, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Moore to Moses, letter, December 22, 1960, and Moore to friends, letter, January 26 1961, Box 1, Folder 2, Amzie Moore Papers; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 44; Dittmer, *Local People*, 103; Moses interview Carson, 1982; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, July 31, 1984, Taylor Branch Papers; Robert Parris Moses, interview by John Dittmer, August 15, 1983, transcript in author's possession (hereafter cited as Moses interview Dittmer, 1983).

and Progressive Voters Leagues, emerged. The NAACP could operate semi-openly, new branches developed, and dormant ones revived. Its membership rose from 377 in 1940 to 1,600 in 1953, and voter registration from 2,000 to 22,000.<sup>3</sup>

Despite initial invigoration, the 1954 *Brown*-school desegregation suit ironically halted most activism from 1955 onwards. The NAACP, which filed the suit, was outlawed in Alabama and prosecuted in other states, causing membership to plummet. Voter registration in Mississippi dropped below 12,000. In the Delta town of Indianola middle-class whites organized the White Citizens' Council (WCC), which grew from 16 to 25,000 members within three months. Nicknamed the "uptown Ku Klux Klan" it used 'legal' tactics, like economic pressure, to stifle activism. KKK and other hate group's membership also accelerated. In the 1956 *Southern Manifesto* state politicians vowed to "resist forced integration by any lawful means," and subsequently permitted the abolition of public schools when forced to integrate, tightened voter registration requirements, and adopted the 'breach of the peace' statute that criminalized anyone encouraging 'disobedience' to Mississippi laws and customs. The Legislature also created the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission (MSSC) to spy on "subversives," meaning anyone challenging the racial hierarchy. Compared to similar commissions in other southern states, one historian noted, the MSSC was the most "extreme," as it "became Mississippi's secret police, wiretapping, bugging, and infiltrating civil rights organizations" and donating \$350,000 to the WCC biannually.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, the national NAACP offered its Mississippi branches little assistance, feeling its resources could gain more results elsewhere. White economic pressure then effectively intimidated entrepreneurs like T.V. Johnson, and acts or threats of violence ran activists like T.R.M. Howard, Gus Courts, and Clinton Battle out of the state. NAACP-activists George Lee and Lamar Smith were murdered (Lee in a car shooting and Smith was shot before numerous witnesses in a courthouse square). Added to this was the notorious lynching of Emmett Till<sup>5</sup>. In McComb in Pike County—a city regarded as fairly progressive for Mississippi with 250 black registered voters—the NAACP went underground. Only a few places, like state capital Jackson or Biloxi in the tourist-dependent Gulf Coast, displayed more activism. Amzie Moore wrote a Chicago friend in 1955 that he feared "I might have to run away up there." That he was still in Mississippi he owed to Howard and his Tri-State Bank and to out-of-state financial assistance

<sup>3</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 33, 53; David T. Beito and Linda Royster Beito, *Black Maverick: T.R.M. Howard and the Fight for Civil Rights and Economic Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 70, 93; Crosby, *A Little Taste of Freedom*, 15, 55.

<sup>4</sup> John Dittmer, "The Politics of the Mississippi Movement," in *The Civil Rights Movement in America*, ed. Eagles, 68; Crosby, *A Little Taste of Freedom*, 64, 66; "Declaration of Constitutional Principles: The Southern Manifesto," March 12, 1956, in *Debating the Civil Rights Movement*, Lawson and Payne, 59-64; "Mississippi" and "Mississippi Code," report, no date, File #0233, Reel 3, Files W. Wilson White, and "Constitutional Law of Mississippi as Adopted February 29, 1956," report, no date, File #0788, Reel 4, Burke Marshall Records, Records of the Department of Justice's Civil Rights Division, 1958-1973, Microfilm, The Civil Rights Movement and the Federal Government Collection, Roosevelt Study Center, Middelburg, the Netherlands; Dittmer, *Local People*, Page 59, 70-71; Woods, *Black Struggle Red Scare*, 95-97. For more on the MSSC see also Yasuhiro Katagiri, *The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission: Civil Rights and State's Rights* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> While many Southern black students who joined the movement in the 1960s attributed their political "awakening" to Till's murder (calling themselves the "Till-generation"), it further stifled activism as whites interpreted the murderers' acquittal as encouragement. In 1955 Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old black boy from Chicago, visited his grandfather, Moses Wright, in Money, Mississippi. On August 26 he allegedly whistled at a white woman, Carolyn Bryant, and asked her out after a dare from some local black youth, although other versions of the story insist that he whistled due to a speech impediment and that the date story was fabricated. On the night of the 28<sup>th</sup>, Carolyn's husband, Roy Bryant, and his half-brother, J.W. Milam, abducted Till, beat him so badly his face was unrecognizable, and after his death threw him in the Tallahatchie River. Medgar Evers and Amzie Moore gathered proof and witness testimonies. Yet despite overriding evidence, an all-white jury acquitted Bryant and Milam. In 1956 both confessed the murder to a *Look*-reporter, but the case could not be retried due to the 'double jeopardy' statute. The Till-murder, trial, and open-casket funeral caused a (inter)national uproar and was widely publicized by the NAACP.

from SCEF, In Friendship, and the national NAACP. Moore therefore knew from personal experience how valuable outside assistance was to movement survival.<sup>6</sup>

Other local activists felt similarly. Medgar Evers and Aaron Henry joined the RNCL and, after its decline, SCLC, but NAACP headquarters pressured Evers to resign. Henry, whose NAACP state presidency was an unpaid voluntary position, retained his SCLC-membership and kept pushing for outside intervention. In 1958 he had written to Ella Baker: “[W]e...have exhausted all local remedies available to us...without calling on the federal government for help.” In 1960 Henry therefore told Moses “that he would work with any group.” However, Moses reflected in 1983, Henry “didn’t have a program.” Moreover, turf battles remained problematic throughout the sixties. Henry and Evers—who feared competition with his NAACP Youth Chapters—always remained ambivalent about allying with SNCC because of its militancy.<sup>7</sup>

Moses quietly acquiesced in the situation. After all, he said, “[t]here was nothing I could do if Amzie wasn’t ready,” so “I spent my time just picking up what I could, watching Amzie, going where he told me to go.” Some distraction came when he received notice that, with the end of his teaching contract, his draft-deferment was revoked. He appealed the decision, arguing that his devotion to pacifism had only “been strengthened” and that his SNCC-work could function as an “alternative service.” In response he was summoned to a July hearing in New York, although he was notified in advance that this “does not warrant the reopening of your case.”<sup>8</sup>

On his way back Moses attended a small SNCC-meeting in Philadelphia where he was introduced to newly elected SNCC-chairman Charles McDew and SNCC-workers Tim Jenkins, Charles Sherrod, and Charles Jones. He related his plans, after which they gave Moses a telephone number and advised “that if there was any trouble I should call this guy [John] Doar,” a white official of the Justice Department’s Civil Rights Division they had had contact with. Moses discovered that SNCC was quite different from before, he reflected in 1983: “I was struck by the amount of politics that was going on within SNCC. People were going to these very high level meetings, and having organizational discussions about priorities [and] fundraising.”<sup>9</sup>

In Moses’ absence SNCC had indeed experienced formative transformations, although it decided in November 1960 that its “major responsibility” continued to be “coordination and communication within the student movement” and that “in relation to local protest areas, SNCC’s role is suggestive rather than directive.” SNCC could nonetheless “initiate action” with “a 2/3 vote of the Committee members present.” While it briefly engaged in political activity by addressing the Democratic and Republican conventions,<sup>10</sup> SNCC continued to emphasize nonviolent direct action. This included the Rock Hill ‘jail-ins’<sup>11</sup> and the Freedom Rides. The CORE had instigated the Freedom Rides, a test of the 1960 Supreme

<sup>6</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 70, 73, 86-87, 101; Amzie Moore to James P. Kizart, letter, December 20, 1955, in *The Most Southern Place on Earth*, Cobb, 222; Ransby, *Ella Baker & The Black Freedom Movement*, 302; Beito and Beito, *Black Maverick*, 153-154, 162, 181.

<sup>7</sup> Aaron Henry to Ella Baker, letter, 5 April 1958, File #00358, Reel 1, Part 2, Series II, Correspondence Ella J. Baker, Records SCLC; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Charles Payne, August 1993, in *Debating the Civil Rights Movement*, Lawson and Payne, 181; Hampton and Fayer, *Voices of Freedom*, 50, 52; Moses interview Dittmer, 1983; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 10, 1983, Taylor Branch Papers.

<sup>8</sup> Lawson and Payne, *Debating the Civil Rights Movement*, 181; Moses interview Carson, 1982; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Anne Romaine, September 1966/November 14, 1987, Anne Romaine Papers; Bob Moses to Mr. Sheenfeld, letter, June 25, 1961, and G.V. Ward, Clerk from Selective Service System, to Bob Moses, letter, July 17, 1961, Box 108, Folder 3, Taylor Branch Papers.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interviews by Taylor Branch, August 10, 1983, and July 30, 1984, Taylor Branch Papers.

<sup>10</sup> Moses later commented it was “very interesting” that “before SNCC even had an office or a program, [Chairman Marion] Barry was going to a political convention,” meaning that from the start there was a clear segment in SNCC that focused on the political rather than religious-induced nonviolent direct action. (Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 10, 1983, Taylor Branch Papers).

<sup>11</sup> In February four SNCC-volunteers—Ruby Doris Smith, Diane Nash, Charles Jones, and Charles Sherrod—were jailed

Court *Boynton*-decision that ruled segregation in (interstate) public transportation unconstitutional, in May 1961. But when white violence halted the original Freedom Riders in Alabama, it had had to abandon the protest<sup>12</sup>. However, SNCC immediately organized a group of replacements. Despite Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy's pleas for a "cooling off period," hundreds of young and adult men and women of both races, with or without ties to organizations, then followed SNCC's example for months; most ended in jail. In Jackson, a SNCC-contingent including James Bevel, Stokely Carmichael, and Bernard Lafayette was sentenced to Parchman state prison, where their joint exposure to its hardships forged a significant bond among them<sup>13</sup>. The Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) ruled to enforce the *Boynton*-decision as of November 1, but Rides continued well after. Diane Nash challenged Martin Luther King to go too, but his refusal to do so left many in SNCC skeptical about his leadership.<sup>14</sup>

By summer other organizations had mostly taken over the Rides. Seeking new goals, SNCC's direct action proponents contemplated a Move on Mississippi (MOM) in Jackson, but gained little ground due to competition with the local NAACP. Meanwhile the Kennedy administration successfully engaged other SNCC-students in talks about sponsoring the 'safer' tactic of voter registration. At a July meeting in Baltimore Charles Jones and Tim Jenkins tried to convince SNCC that voter registration should be its "top priority." Backed by Charles McDew and Charles Sherrod, they sought Moses' endorsement for their side in Philadelphia. "[T]here were always people in SNCC who, though they seemed pure and counter-ambitious, were extremely 'political,'" Moses reflected years later. The Baltimore minutes show Sherrod even visited Cleveland "to gain more information" on Moses' project. Most direct action advocates, however, felt that voter registration was a "cop out." In 1988 Moses recalled how James Bevel even "blasted my vision of Mississippi and the importance of Amzie." At an August retreat at Highlander a compromise was reached: SNCC would have a direct action wing headed by Diane Nash and a voter registration one under Charles Jones. Despite the compromise and another three-week seminar in Nashville, debates on "what we think SNCC should be" continued. Meanwhile Moses discovered part of the solution.<sup>15</sup>

In mid-July Moses, who had begun corresponding with John Doar, received a letter from C.C. Bryant, the Pike County NAACP president. Bryant had read about their plans in a blurb Ed King put in *Jet* and invited him to McComb although aware "that it wasn't a NAACP project." Bryant was a black activist

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in Rock Hill, South Carolina, to dramatize the plight of a CORE student group who chose "jail-no-bail" after a sit-in, but their example failed to inspire others. See Carson, *In Struggle*, 32.

<sup>12</sup> CORE's 1961 Freedom Rides resembled its 1947 "journey of reconciliation": two interracial groups undertook a bus journey from Washington D.C. to New Orleans to test the Supreme Court *Boynton*-decision. When they reached Birmingham a white mob savagely beat the Riders, as well as those on another bus which was set ablaze near Anniston. For the full story of the Freedom Rides, see Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) and the chapters on the Freedom Rides in Branch's *Parting the Waters*, Carson's *In Struggle*, and Zinn's *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*.

<sup>13</sup> See Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*, 54-57 and Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 482-485. The conditions at Parchman were the severest within the state prison system. The activists were placed in filthy, bug-infested cells in its maximum security unit. After they started singing Freedom Songs their towels, clothes, toothbrushes, sheets, and mattresses were confiscated, and cold wind deliberately blown into the cells. Guards used electric prods on them and several were placed in so-called 'sweatboxes,' unvented and dark units of only six feet in which prisoners can only stand in upright position that were often placed in the hot sun—a practice that has now been defined as torture.

<sup>14</sup> "Declaration to the Democratic Convention," File #0077, and "Election Day Action," Files # 0244-0247, Reel 1, Series I, Marion Barry Chairman Files, and "The First Year," report, no date, File #0786, and Minutes of Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Meeting, November 25-27, 1960, Files #0780-0781, Reel 3, Series III, Staff Meetings, and Minutes of Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Meeting, November 25-27, 1960, Files #0602-0603, Reel 11, Series V, SNCC Conferences, SNCC Papers; Carson, *In Struggle*, 27-32; King, *Freedom Song*, 70.

<sup>15</sup> Carson, *In Struggle*, 31-32; Minutes of SNCC Meeting, July 14-16, 1961, Baltimore, MD, File #0790, and Minutes SNCC Meeting, June 9-11, 1961, Louisville, KY, Files #0792-0795, Reel 3, Series III, Staff Meetings, SNCC Papers; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 44; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, March 13, 1988, Box 108, Folder 1, Taylor Branch Papers; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 486.

much like Moore: a financially independent union man whose front yard functioned as a civil rights center complete with 'radical' literature. Intrigued, Moore and Moses drove to McComb. Moses found Bryant a "good person" and Bryant later named Moses "the most impressive [SNCC] guy that I met." Following Ella Baker's example, Moses quickly established a family-like connection with him. In 2002 a reporter noted that Moses still regularly visited him and "visibly relaxed," an attitude-shift Bryant associated with "[him] comin' home."<sup>16</sup>

The three toured the McComb area. Located in the southwest Mississippi hills, the region differed from the Delta. Unsited for cotton plantations and less densely populated by blacks, it consisted mostly of small farmers who were poorer than their Delta counterparts. Consequently, black and white farmers competed more directly economically. This, whites felt, necessitated more Klan-style repression, making the region, as one historian said, "remarkably hateful." But in McComb, a young town of 9,000 whites and 4,000 blacks, activists were slowly recovering from the mid-fifties. Some had even testified in Washington for the 1957 Civil Rights Act and the NAACP had restarted voter-education meetings and organized a youth chapter. They therefore agreed to start here instead of Cleveland, and Moses moved in with Bryant.<sup>17</sup>

Many historians have interpreted the McComb campaign as a conscious approach to focus on Mississippi to distinguish SNCC from existing organizations which generally avoided the "tough areas." However, the choice of Mississippi in general—and McComb in particular—developed by accident rather than design; it stemmed simply from Moses' identification with Amzie Moore. As he explained in 2010: "I didn't go to [SNCC] and say, 'here's my plan...can I get your permission?' I hooked up with Amzie [and told Jane] 'I want to...work on that.' But there's no contract, no money is exchanging hands, no promises made about anything. [Then] Amzie says, 'go to McComb.' I go to McComb. So where's the group-centered leadership?" Charles Jones agreed that they simply "decided on Mississippi...because Bob was there." Moreover, Moses denied in 1983 that he went to McComb deliberately because it was the most 'hard-core' since at this point he had "no real idea about a distinction in geographical areas in Mississippi" and its consequences in terms of racial violence.<sup>18</sup>

Moses' explanation of how the project originated also shows his single-mindedness. His commitment was less to SNCC than to Moore, evidenced by his year-long lack of involvement with the organization and the Freedom Rides, which fitted neither his personality nor plans. Although he was "a minor celebrity in SNCC circles before the Freedom Rides," without any new action to account for, he now hardly had a position. Moreover, new students had joined and others, like Stembridge and Lawson, had left. Until Philadelphia Moses did not attend any SNCC meetings. Historians have lauded this as a token of his existentialist stress on action over words, but his absence is also explained by the simpler fact that he was not embedded in the organization and therefore had no knowledge of what programs and meetings he could hook on to. He affirmed in 1966: "I didn't know anybody" except "the ones I had met in 1960" and "[didn't] know...if anyone expressed interest in actually coming to work on [Moore's] program." He had no "knowledge of all the Kennedy stuff": Philadelphia "was the first time I heard about [SNCC's] voter education project." It was only after that, Jenkins certified in 1965, that "we kept constant contact with him by telephone and letter writing."<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 113; Moses interview Dittmer, 1983; C.C. Bryant, interview by Jimmy Dykes, November 11, 1995, transcript, Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi Collection, University of Southern Mississippi; Julia Cass, "The Moses Factor," in *Mother Jones*, May/June 2002, <http://motherjones.com/politics/2002/05/moses-factor> (accessed May 12, 2008). Bryant was financially independent through a northern-based railroad job and owning a barbershop, which, like Moore, safeguarded him from white economic sanctions for his activism.

<sup>17</sup> Cagin and Dray, *We Are Not Afraid*, 14; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 112-113; Dittmer, *Local People*, 100; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 24. For more on the hills counties, see Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth*.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April, 15 2010; Moses interview Dittmer, 1983; Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 188.

<sup>19</sup> Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 486; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, July 30, 1984, Taylor Branch Papers;

At its Baltimore meeting SNCC decided to supply Moses “with personnel and grant [him] the position of Special Field Secretary.” Wyatt Walker, however, claimed Moses as an SCLC-worker. This worried SNCC, fearing the Project’s independence. On August 3 Moses therefore informed Walker he would “be working solely as a representative of SNCC.” He expressed regret over the inflexibility of “the lines of communication between the organizations,” but “the job needs to be done so I have made my choice. You can understand that I feel closer to the students.” He nonetheless asked SCLC to sponsor “immediate relief” and “transportation.” He enclosed a project flyer, which, he emphasized, stated SCLC “as one of the sponsors.” SCLC donated \$250. On August 28 Ed King asked SCLC again for funds, which underlined SNCC’s precarious financial position. With no professional communications department that could provide a steady income by projecting SNCC’s activities, its dependence on big organizations were crucial at this stage even as it criticized SCLC for projecting King.<sup>20</sup>

One means to counter this was having the local communities in which SNCC worked provide financial resources, which aligned with Moses’ and Baker’s beliefs about local autonomy. Consequently Moses and Bryant agreed that McComb locals had to support Moses and two other workers for a month themselves. The last two weeks in July Moses therefore went around asking locals and church congregations for \$5 or \$10 contributions, aided by ‘Super Cool Daddy’ Webb Owens and Jerry Gibson, two NAACP-affiliated railroad men whom locals trusted with their money. Naturally, Moses said in 1983, “they didn’t give it to me because they didn’t know me from Adam.” One Baptist Church offered its mimeograph machine, but most aid came through black businessmen like restaurant owner Aylene Quinn, dry cleaning owner Ernest Nobles, and Burgland Supermarket owner Peter Lewis. Through Bryant and Ben Hill, both members of the Freemasons, the Masonic Temple above the supermarket was made available as SNCC-office and citizenship school. This taught Moses that “the quality of...the local person, that you go to work with, is everything in terms of whether the project can get off the ground.” In practice this invariably meant starting with the black middle class “however thin it is.”<sup>21</sup>

Moses’ dependence on this group is telling in two respects. First, it stressed what T.R.M. Howard’s biographers called the “unsung role of the black middle class,” which “used business success as a launching pad into civil rights.” In 1950s Mississippi, they argued, black entrepreneurs “formed the core leadership that kept the movement alive,” and not those whom whites identified as blacks’ leaders: the ministers whom they played with “recognition and small favors” in return for “accepting the status quo” and the principals of black high schools and state colleges. Second, it indicates that SNCC initially included all in the community’s social strata in its constituency. It had to; in order to operate at all, historian John Dittmer wrote, SNCC needed “the support of those...whose word meant something in the community.”<sup>22</sup>

In early August Moses started the voter registration drive with John Hardy and Reginald Robinson from the Nashville and Baltimore movements, and five high school students recommended by Webb Owens. Remembering Ella Baker’s advice about the ability of ordinary citizens to instigate change and to optimize their chances, they knocked on the doors of everyone, including farmers and sharecroppers,

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Robert Parris Moses, interview by Anne Romaine, September 1966/November 14, 1987, Anne Romaine Papers; Tim Jenkins, interview by Howard Zinn, December 18, 1965, transcript, Box 3, Folder 10, Howard Zinn Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society; Robert Parris Moses, email interview by author, March 9, 2011.

<sup>20</sup> “SNCC Office Report,” File #0304, Reel 3, Series II, Executive and Central Committee Files, and Minutes of Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Meeting, July 14-16, 1961, Baltimore, Md, Files #0792-0795, Reel 3, Series III, Staff Meetings, SNCC Papers; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 38-39; Moses interview Carson, 1982; Bob Moses to Wyatt T. Walker, letter, August 3 1961, Box 108, Folder 3, Taylor Branch Papers; Ed King to Wyatt T. Walker, letters, July 24, 1961, and August 28 1961, Files #00316-00317, and Walker to SNCC, letter, July 11, 1961, File #00314, Reel 4, Part 2, Series III, Wyatt T. Walker Correspondence, Records SCLC.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Parris Moses and C.C. Bryant, “Comments,” at Mississippi Voices of the Civil Rights Movement Conference, McComb, Mississippi, July 9, 1983, transcript in author’s possession; Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 115; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 45; Dittmer, *Local People*, 100-104; Moses interview Dittmer, 1983.

<sup>22</sup> Beito and Beito, *Black Maverick*, xi, xiv-xv; Dittmer, *Local People*, 104.



whereas past NAACP drives had mainly targeted the middle class. To help put them at ease the SNCC-workers dressed in denim work overalls. Canvassing, however, required massive persuasive skills. To qualify to vote one had to pay poll tax two subsequent years in advance and answer 21 questions at the county courthouse. The registrar could ask them about any one of the state Constitution's 285 sections, and he had complete discretion in judging the interpretation. Consequently illiterate whites regularly passed, while blacks, no matter how well-educated, nearly always failed. State law also required the printing of all applicants' names in local newspapers, so vigilant landlords or employers could then cut them from their homes or jobs. Finding even their parents unwilling to register, Owens motivated the high school students with ice cream. Some interested locals nonetheless came to the nightly citizenship classes to prepare further for the journey to the county courthouse. When ready, applicants could just go by themselves or accompanied by SNCC-workers, but most of them, Moses recalled in 1986, "felt some sense of security [if we went along]." <sup>23</sup>

While registration drives were nothing new—the NAACP prided itself in doing so for decades—there were significant differences between Moses' program and earlier ones. SNCC-workers actually came to McComb from outside, worked on a full-time basis for an extended time, and blended with locals by moving into their homes and sharing their exposure to Mississippi's hardships. They thus had the time for extensive local organization. In SCLC- and NAACP-programs the work was executed mainly by local activists whose time was split between family and jobs. National NAACP did not send people from New York, or SCLC from Atlanta, to work in Mississippi; although it employed state field secretaries and a voter registration director, it generally depended on the Moores, Bryants, or Septima Clarks. While history thus shows many examples of locals doing the same work and encountering the same opposition, few penetrated the national consciousness. Yet when Moses, an outsider, followed suit, white liberals took note and exalted his enterprise, in Jack Newfield's words, as a "most creative and heroic single act." The fact that such commentators romanticized the idea indicates that it represented a break from how people previously worked in the movement. <sup>24</sup>

The workers also discovered an intangible sense of discontinuity. The Freedom Rides, Moses argued in 1966, had "permeated black consciousness in Mississippi and turned it around" from 1960. He now had "a ready-made identity": "[L]ittle kids would just look at me and say, 'There goes a Freedom Rider'"—a revering nickname locals bestowed on *all* civil rights workers. In 2010 he clarified its significance: "That's a huge plateau shifting [in] the consciousness of a whole people to think that there is a new kind of person walking in our midst, [who are] called Freedom Riders [and] have staked out a territory." This underlines the need for historians to identify turning points in the 'long movement' framework. Next to the sit-ins, the Freedom Rides were such a defining moment; even if they achieved little else in Mississippi, Moses believed, "The groundwork was laid for the voter registration program with that entry of the Freedom Rides." <sup>25</sup>

The Rides had especially energized Mississippi's youth. In 2009 Dorie Ladner, then a local teenager, recounted seeing some Freedom Riders in Jackson: "I was like 'Oh my God! Here they are!' ...I felt that I had finally found someone who thought and felt like I did." Her earlier involvement in the NAACP

<sup>23</sup> Staughton Lynd, "Mississippi: 1961-1962," *Liberation* 14 (January 1970): 7-17\*; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 115; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 46; Dittmer, *Local People*, 70-71, 105; Cagin and Dray, *We Are Not Afraid*, 141; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, July 30, 1984, Taylor Branch Papers; Robert Moses, interview by Blackside, Inc., May 19, 1986, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries, St. Louis, Missouri. \*Lynds' article is a transcript of Howard Zinn's interview with Moses of June 20, 1962, see Box 2, Folder 10, Howard Zinn Papers.

<sup>24</sup> Newfield, *A Prophetic Minority*, 73.

<sup>25</sup> Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 50-51; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Anne Romaine, September 1966/November 14, 1987, Anne Romaine Papers; Handwritten notes Taylor Branch, March 13, 1988, Box 108, Folder 1, Taylor Branch Papers; Hammerback and Jensen, "Working in 'Quiet Places,'" 6; Robert Parris Moses, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 15, 2010.

Youth Chapters had not moved her in the same way. Luvaghn Brown, a Jackson teenager, shared her experience: “The Freedom Rides provided a spark...There were people in Mississippi with the ability to lead [but] what was missing was a strategy, a plan, a way to begin. Evers was a leader, but the NAACP did not resonate with this group of young, angry, people. When I heard Bevel and Lafayette speak, I was moved to action, as were others.” Another reason was that in SNCC other youngsters set policies, whereas in the Youth Councils in Mississippi they often had less autonomy. Nineteen-year-old McComb high school graduate Hollis Watkins, another Youth Council member, saw the Rides on television in California during a family visit. When they hit Jackson, he instantly flew home, intending to join them.<sup>26</sup>

Watkins’ story underlines the interplay between the national and the local with regard to current events. As SNCC-worker Charles Cobb said in 2010, “Seeing Diane Nash and the other Freedom Riders on television indirectly posed the question: ‘What are *you* going to do?’” Watkins again showed how the national was present in locals’ motivations when he went to the Masonic Temple to offer his services: a friend told him that the nation’s most renown black leader, Martin Luther King, was setting up a program there. Instead, he recalled in 1996, he found Moses, who “very plain and simple” handed him a copy of the registration test. After he completed it, Moses told him he would have qualified if he had been old enough<sup>27</sup> to vote. Now that he knew “how it’s done,” Moses asked, was he willing to “assist us in getting other people to register”? Watkins agreed and told some friends, including Curtis Hayes. The next day they started canvassing.<sup>28</sup>

Moses established deep personal connections with the student volunteers, which became typical of his relationships with Mississippi youth. He treated them as equals and, following Camus, became “one of us” by joining rather than delegating their activities, Watkins said: “Bob was right there doing the same thing with us, it wasn’t like you go out and do it and I’ll stay here.” Simultaneously a discrepancy between Moses and the students remained due to his character, background, and age. According to Todd Gitlin, in the movement “a few years’ difference amount[ed] to a generation.” Being 26 Moses therefore “was something of an older brother to a movement suspicious of fathers.” As with the Atlanta students he helped them understand the bigger picture. Watkins lauded Moses’ attention to details and Brown recalled that he “always helped us understand purpose.” In this Moses also surpassed most SNCC-workers. Marion Barry, who joined the McComb staff, acknowledged in 1965 that “it was very unclear then where we were going,” but it was “much more clear to probably Bob Moses than anybody.” Whereas they emphasized desegregation, Moses said in 1983 he had already realized then that they were struggling to “bring Mississippi up to par with the rest of the country” on *all* levels.<sup>29</sup>

With more help the drive became more effective. Many older blacks opened up once they discovered that the canvassers were local. Watkins recounted one lady who immediately promised her

<sup>26</sup> Dorie Ladner, interview by author, Washington, DC, November 16, 2009; Luvaghn Brown, email interview by author, January 13, 2011; Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 118-119; Hollis Watkins, interview by Robert Wright, August 5, 1968, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University; Charles E. Cobb, *On the Road to Freedom: A Guided Tour of the Civil Rights Trail* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 2008), 283; Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 92; Hollis Watkins, interview by John Rachal, October 1996, transcript, Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi Collection, University of Southern Mississippi.

<sup>27</sup> In the 1960s legal voting age in Mississippi was twenty-one.

<sup>28</sup> Charles Cobb, “Comments,” Panel Discussion, Session ‘From Student Activists to Field Organizers,’ SNCC’s 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Reunion Conference, Shaw University, Raleigh, NC, April 15, 2010; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 493; Hollis Watkins, interview by John Rachal, October 1996, transcript, Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi Collection, University of Southern Mississippi.

<sup>29</sup> Hollis Watkins, interview by Blackside, Inc., November 9, 1985, for *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries; Marion Barry, interview by Howard, December 18, 1965, Box 3, Folder 10, Howard Zinn Papers; Moses interview Dittmer, 1983.

assistance when she found he was “John Watkins’ son.” The teenagers also distributed flyers, invited locals to the SNCC-office, and organized meetings at the Burgland Supermarket. Since classes had started on August 7, Moses accompanied four blacks to the county courthouse in Magnolia, and three qualified to vote. Three followed the next day, and two passed. On the third day Moses accompanied another nine. The registrar, getting suspicious, now only passed one.<sup>30</sup>

The arrival of 16 black applicants attracted coverage in the white *McComb-Enterprise Journal*. This in turn motivated black farmers in McComb’s surrounding rural Amite and Walthall counties to ask Moses for schools there too. Although both black majority counties, Walthall had no black registered voters and Amite had one (McDew, however, derisively commented: “We haven’t been able to find him.”). But Moses lacked workers and money to branch out. Moreover, he recounted in 1983, McComb residents indicated “very strongly” that Amite would invite violence. After discussing it with Bryant, he decided to proceed anyway: “[F]rom the human point of view, they had greater needs than those people in Pike County [and] from the psychological point of view where the whole problem in Mississippi is pervaded with fear,” that is, if you turned “down the tough areas [the people] would simply lose confidence in you.” Working out the logistics of expansion, the farmers meanwhile attended classes in McComb.<sup>31</sup>

On August 15 Moses accompanied three of them, two elderly women and one man, to the Amite County courthouse in Liberty. When the registrar roughly asked why they came, the three, Moses wrote in a field report, were “literally paralyzed with fear.” He answered on their behalf, after which the registrar questioned him and made them wait while he helped a white lady complete the answers on her test. Finally they were allowed to apply. Meanwhile, Moses wrote, the sheriff, some deputies, and clerks came “looking in, staring, moving back out, muttering.” A highway patrolman, W.D. Carwile, sat down, and “we stayed that way in sort of uneasy tension all morning.” After six hours all three had completed the test, but all failed. They nonetheless considered their attempt “a victory.” On their way home, however, Carwile pulled them over. Moses got out and asked why. After confirming he was the New York “nigger who’s come to tell the niggers how to register,” Carwile told him to return to his seat. When Moses wrote down the officer’s name, Carwile shoved him back in and ordered them to follow him to McComb. There Moses was arrested while Carwile and the county attorney consulted the law books. They first charged him with interfering with an arrest, but since only he was arrested they changed it to impeding an officer in his duties. To Moses this was an eye-opener: “Like any Black person living in America, I knew racism. What I hadn’t encountered before Mississippi was the use of law as an instrument of outright oppression.” He later believed his arrest occurred because of “the failure of the highway patrol to effectively deter [us from] coming to the courthouse” in the first place.<sup>32</sup>

Told to stand trial that night, Moses asked for his one phone call. Being broke, he called John Doar collect. Deliberately speaking loudly he cited violations of the 1957 and 1960 Civil Rights Acts, as Doar had outlined in his letters, and demanded a federal investigation. The “astonished” whites, he recalled, then got “fidgety.” An FBI-investigation was indeed conducted the next day, but the agents knowingly

<sup>30</sup> Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 493; Cobb, *On the Road to Freedom*, 285; Hollis Watkins, interview by John Rachal, October 1996, transcript, Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi Collection, University of Southern Mississippi. Watkins recalled how the lady who offered her assistance responded: “I can’t believe that young folks from around here are out doing this...I’m going to tell all my other friends ‘cause we thought you folks was from somewhere out of Mississippi and didn’t know nothin’ about what was happening down here.” This again indicates how rural blacks related more easily to civil rights workers who were native or who tried to become part of the community.

<sup>31</sup> Branch, *Parting the Waters*, Page 493-494; Dittmer, *Local People*, 105; Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*, 67, 77; Moses interview Dittmer, 1983; Lynd, “Mississippi: 1961-1962,” 8.

<sup>32</sup> Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 494-495; Moses interview by Taylor Branch, July 30, 1984, Taylor Branch Papers; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 47-48, 58; Tom Hayden, *Revolution in Mississippi*, pamphlet, January, 1962, Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi Collection, University of Southern Mississippi; Field Report Bob Moses, no date, in *The Making of Revolutionaries*, Forman, 226-227; Moses interview Dittmer, 1983; John Emmerich, “New York Negro Refuses to Pay \$5 Court Costs,” *McComb-Enterprise Journal*, August 16, 1961.

omitted the discussions about the charges needed to prove wrongful arrest from their report. Moreover, the contention with voting rights was circumstantial, so eventually nothing came of it. The practice of civil rights workers calling the Department collect was stopped once southern white congressmen discovered it. That night, however, the call likely interfered with Moses' sentencing. Although pronounced guilty, Moses received a ninety-day suspended sentence and a \$50 fine, which would be remitted if he paid \$5 in court costs. He refused and was taken to the Magnolia jail. Two days later Jack Young, a black NAACP-affiliated lawyer from Jackson, paid the fine and he came out "reluctantly." They fruitlessly appealed the conviction. Throughout Moses' attitude was in line with the nonviolent tactics of SNCC's direct action wing. He chose 'jail-no-bail' on principle, he told the *Enterprise Journal*, because "I don't think I was guilty of the charges." He added another classic nonviolent tactic by not eating while jailed. This indicates that Moses clearly identified with the philosophy and tactics of SNCC's direct action wing although he never advocated them as a program.<sup>33</sup>

News of Moses' arrest reverberated everywhere. Even *The New York Times* publicized his attempt to "upset [his] Mississippi conviction." The story was "widely broadcast" on local radio and John Emmerich of the *Enterprise Journal*, a white states' rights advocate who had suffered physical assaults for his moderate racial views, interviewed Moses for the first of several articles. Central in local white reports was Moses' outsider status. Emmerich stressed that he was a "New York Negro" who had traveled to Europe. His relation with the Justice Department was also overemphasized; one editor even called the Department collect but was refused and wondered "why Moses was so privileged." The MSSC began investigating Moses too, concluding that he was a troublemaker who had "objected to being stopped in a rude, verbal manner" and "refused to leave the scene" while "[continuing] to abuse the patrolman verbally."<sup>34</sup>

When Moses returned to McComb on August 18, he found that over a dozen Freedom Riders released from Parchman and other SNCC-workers who were stymied in Jackson, like Marion Barry, Travis Britt, George Lowe, and MacArthur Cotton, had come in. His arrest had turned McComb into the "summer's new magnet town" because it showed that in the Deep South voter registration and direct action were interchangeable; if you mentioned voter registration "they're going to hit you [and] that's as direct as you can get." The group had continued canvassing, but also organized direct action workshops. Moses disliked this development since the NAACP opposed direct action for fear of violence. Bryant had fended off last year's sit-in surge by telling local youth "they needed Roy Wilkins's permission." Yet Moses gave them "free access" because it "was important in terms of building the unity within SNCC." Moreover, his inexperience, one historian argued, put him "in no position to question the moves of such established movement heroes," who, he realized, "generated great excitement" among the local teenagers. The latter then founded the Pike County Nonviolent

<sup>33</sup> John Doar and Dorothy Landsberg, "The Performance of the FBI in Investigating Violations of Federal Laws Protecting the Right to Vote—1960-1967," no date, copy in author's possession copy; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, July 30, 1984, Taylor Branch Papers; Lynd, "Mississippi: 1961-1962," 9-10; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 46-47; John C. Hammerback and Richard J. Jensen, "Calling Washington Collect: Robert Parris Moses and the Kennedy Administration," in *Civil Rights Rhetoric and the American Presidency*, eds. James Arnt Aune and Enrique D. Rigsby (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2005), 139-140; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 117-118, 123; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 48; John Emmerich, "New York Negro Refuses to Pay \$5 Court Costs," *McComb-Enterprise Journal*, August 16, 1961; Hayden, *Revolution in Mississippi*, 10.

<sup>34</sup> Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 48; "Negro Plans Appeal" and "Southern 'Dynamite' John Oliver Emmerich," *New York Times*, August 25, 1961, and December 4, 1961; John Emmerich, "New York Negro Refuses to Pay \$5 Court Costs," and "Jailed Negro Pays Fine, Continues Voter School," *McComb-Enterprise Journal*, August 16 and 18, 1961; Hayden, *Revolution in Mississippi*, 10; A.L. Hopkins, "Robert Moses, Colored Male," investigative report, April 19, 1962, Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission Online, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, MS, [http://mdah.state.ms.us/arrec/digital\\_archives/sovcom/](http://mdah.state.ms.us/arrec/digital_archives/sovcom/) (accessed November 22, 2007).

Movement, and Moses asked Young to “help expedite” the NAACP’s aid in “any legal difficulties which may arise.”<sup>35</sup>

Rather than dramatize Mississippi conditions, however, Moses and Bryant felt his arrest should be used to show locals their commitment. Going back to Amite added to his credibility. Grown in size, SNCC could now divide responsibilities: Moses returned to Amite, and Hardy, Britt, Lowe, and Cotton moved to Tylertown in Walthall. McComb was left to those who preferred to mix voter registration with direct action. That this division occurred so easily shows the efficiency of SNCC’s organizational structure: although Moses started the project, neither he nor his colleagues ever saw him as ‘the’ leader who determined its direction. Consequently his and the other workers’ freewheeling within the project underscored SNCC’s openness for its individual members to do what they felt was best. The egalitarian leadership division in SNCC, eliminating bureaucratic regulations of asking permission from Moses and Atlanta headquarters, thus allowed for a swift transition into the three areas. It also highlights SNCC’s desire to solely coordinate local initiatives; the workers moved flexibly along local demands rather than rigidly holding onto their own programs.

Getting started in Amite proved difficult. To avoid detection, Bryant introduced Moses to dairy farmer E.W. Steptoe during nightfall. Steptoe was the head of the Amite NAACP branch, which had operated since 1953. According to historian Charles Payne it was fairly successful with 200 members, until the *Brown*-decision. Sheriff E.L. Caston interrupted one meeting and impounded its membership rolls. One by one the members, threatened with economic reprisals, retreated, and the branch lived on in theory only. Some people stood with Steptoe, like his neighbor Herbert Lee, another landowning farmer, but most “would kind of duck” when they saw him on the streets. Few wanted to buy his milk or help with loans. Like Amzie Moore, he was forced to appeal to outside groups to survive. In late 1960 he asked Roy Wilkins for financial assistance; eleven months later so did Bryant.<sup>36</sup>

Steptoe agreed to take Moses in for two weeks. They started nightly citizenship classes at his farm but soon moved them to a church in the woods when Steptoe’s activist network reported a surge in WCC-meetings at the county courthouse in Liberty. As a result only two to five attended classes, whereas classes in Walthall, aided by Bryant’s uncle, attracted around thirty. Herbert Lee came regularly, although, Moses recalled in 1984, he “did not talk much.” Lee also drove him and Steptoe around, since the latter lacked a car. In October therefore Moses asked SNCC to buy him one to cover the vast distance between the farm and church. At the farm Moses felt “even more isolated” from SNCC because whites had denied Steptoe a telephone. Unsurprisingly Steptoe, like Moore, stacked weapons everywhere. They then heard of four blacks who successfully registered on August 22. Encouraged, farmer Curtis Dawson and Reverend Alfred Knox asked Moses to accompany them to the registrar.<sup>37</sup>

On August 29 they left energized; Moses recalled singing “Climbing Jacob’s Ladder” in his mind “like a mantra.” This did not last long: when they approached the Liberty courthouse three whites stopped

<sup>35</sup> Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 496; Carson, *In Struggle*, 50; Moses interview by Dittmer, 1983; Cagin and Dray, *We Are Not Afraid*, 145; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 52; Hollis Watkins, interview by John Rachal, October 1996, transcript, Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi Collection, University of Southern Mississippi; Dittmer, *Local People*, 85; Bob Moses to Jack Young, letter, August 18, 1961, File #0558, Reel 42, Series XVII, Other Organizations, SNCC Papers. Watkins recalled in the Rachal interview that in the nonviolent direct action workshops Marion Barry “taught us about the process of protecting yourselves when people came out to attack you [and] preparing ourselves to be able to take the abuse that would be coming from the white folks.”

<sup>36</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 105-106; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 49; Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 113-114; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 494-496; Eldridge W. Steptoe, Jr., interview by Jimmy Dykes, November 14, 1995, transcript Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi Collection, University of Southern Mississippi; C.C. Bryant to NAACP headquarters, letter, October 1961, Reel 10, Group II, Box C-75, Part 27 Selected Branch Files, Microfilm, Records NAACP.

<sup>37</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 105-106; Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 113-114; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, July 30, 1984, Taylor Branch Papers; Lynd, “Mississippi: 1961-1962,” 10; Robert Parris Moses, interview by author, April 15, 2010; Moses to Forman, letter, October 2, 1961, File #1348, Reel 69, Appendix A: Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Papers (hereafter cited as Appendix A: MFDP Papers), SNCC Papers.

them. One was Billy Jack Caston, the sheriff's cousin who had a violent reputation, and the others the sheriff's son and another cousin. Caston likely knew Moses by sight since the church was near his residence. An FBI-report and a field report by Moses state Caston asked what they were up to. When Moses did not answer, Caston hit him in the temple with a knife-handle, although his semi-autobiography mentioned the beating started "without a word" and all three whites participated. Kneeling, he covered his head while Caston kept punching him. Knox tried to pull Caston off Moses, and Dawson begged him to stop. When he finally did the three nonetheless proceeded to the courthouse at Moses' suggestion: "I felt it was important to keep going, that was the point." Along the way he told a highway patrolman about the beating, but he "didn't say [or do] anything." Neither the FBI-report nor the field report mention the patrolman, but claim he asked the sheriff for an arrest warrant, who refused since Moses was unsure if a weapon was used. At the courthouse they found the registrar gone, so they left. In his semi-autobiography, however, Moses wrote that people gave him "shocked stares" at the courthouse because he bled profusely, and the registrar then "told us to leave." Regardless, the day ended without a chance of registering or action from the authorities.<sup>38</sup>

The Caston-beating magnified Moses' reputation among SNCC-workers and locals. Ernest Nobles "couldn't understand what Bob Moses was...He had more guts than any one man I've ever known." Historians have described it extensively, placing his ordeal at the center of a heroic tale. Taylor Branch even claimed he acquired "a Christlike name within SNCC, where the story was repeated that he had clasped his hands and looked heavenward during the Caston assault, saying 'Forgive them.'" Of course Moses was neither the first nor last civil rights worker ever beaten, so why has this beating become so iconic? The answer is likely found in Moses' response, which symbolized *the* quality of the movement's 'new wave': the refusal to be stopped by violence. After all, public beatings had successfully deterred past activists, including union representatives. They were designed to humiliate opponents based on the southern 'code of honor,' which interpreted a refusal to retaliate as cowardice. Psychologically a beating was often devastating too. NAACP-activist John Shillady for example was beaten by a judge in Texas in 1919. Being "badly shaken," he resigned. Since the sit-ins and Freedom Rides, however, not fighting back became seen as a means to maintain "one's poise and dignity" rather than humiliation. Even those who did not prescribe to Christian interpretations of nonviolence witnessed its effect on movement supporters and opponents. It could therefore be argued that this was the distinguishing feature between the 1960s movement and previous ones. Since Moses' was the first example of nonviolence during a beating while registering to vote (rather than integrate public facilities) that occurred within this 'new' context, the Caston-beating underscored this sensation of movement discontinuity.<sup>39</sup>

For Moses, however, this had not been easy. He had shielded himself from humiliation during the assault by going into his Hamilton survival mode: "I kind of separated out of my body. Like an observer," but "tried to stick closely to the game plan." Nonviolence after all required a well-thought out composure, which calculated the effect on opponents, supporters, *and* oneself. While Camus' philosophy had prepared Moses intellectually, emotionally it was another matter. He came to terms with it at Steptoe's: "I learned to live with my fears. Organizing myself was a necessary first step. When you're out there...with no electricity, no radio, no running water, everything moves very slowly and you really have time to go into yourself. I used to think, Pick one foot up and step forward, put it down and pick the next one up...[you learn] the importance of a daily routine carrying you through." It nonetheless remained tricky, he told a reporter in the 1960s: "The

<sup>38</sup> Lassiter and Crespino, eds., *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism*, 127; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 497-498; Robert Parris Moses, interviews by Taylor Branch, July 30, 1984, and March 13, 1988, and handwritten notes Taylor Branch, January 16, 1999, Box 108, Folder 1, and "Statements Moses to FBI," report, September 9, 1961, Box 108, Folder 2, Taylor Branch Papers; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 26; Moses Field Report, no date, in *The Making of Revolutionaries*, Forman, 223-224.

<sup>39</sup> Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 500; Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 148; Hammerback and Jensen, "Working in 'Quiet Places,'" 7; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 82; Patricia Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice: The NAACP and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: The New Press, 2009), 86-87.



question of personal fear just has to be constantly fought.” It was “an inside question” to which “I don’t know if there is any answer at all.”<sup>40</sup>

The men returned to Steptoe’s rather than McComb for medical treatment because Moses figured he might deter the locals forever. In 1965 Steptoe said he “didn’t recognize Bob at first he was so bloody.” He drove him to Dr. Anderson, a black veteran and doctor new in town without movement ties. Moses’ affidavit reveals that he had three “lacerations on the forehead and scalp” that required one, three, and five stitches. Moses then visited Young, who told him he “had the right” to ask for a prosecution. Afterwards he drove to a mass meeting held in support of the Pike County Nonviolent Movement. Some 200 locals attended, leading to alarmed front-page coverage in local white papers. Both James Bevel and Moses spoke, but whereas Bevel, Eric Burner wrote, “moved the crowd to fury” in his southern preacher-style, Moses related his ordeals in a “soft monotone.” He summarized: “The law down here is law made by white people, enforced by white people, for the benefit of white people. It will be that way until the Negroes begin to vote.” He then announced his return to Liberty the next day.<sup>41</sup>

In Liberty Moses indeed filed charges against Caston—the first time a black had done so against a white in county history. Although “clearly not on my side,” he recalled the prosecutor was “fairly professional.” After it took all day to file the charges, he advised Moses to sleep on it. That night a farmer named Weathersbee came to Steptoe’s farm, saying he wanted to register if Moses accompanied him. He agreed. Joined by Travis Britt they returned to Liberty the next day. Britt was told to wait outside the courthouse while Weathersbee registered and Moses attended Caston’s trial, which was arranged two hours after he completed the prosecution. Over 100 whites carrying weapons filled the courtroom. *The New York Times* reported that Caston justified the beating by claiming that Moses had provoked him: Moses “brushed his shoulder and spun around into a boxing stance on the sidewalk.” To underscore his outside status, Caston’s attorney asked Moses “whether he had participated in riots...in Japan or San Francisco.” When the all-white jury deliberated the verdict, Moses was told to wait with Britt. When he left the courthouse, shots were fired into air and the sheriff told them to leave. Weathersbee was told that the courthouse had closed and he could not finish his registration. Police escorted them to the county line while Caston was acquitted.<sup>42</sup>

Seeking justice elsewhere, Moses contacted John Doar. On September 1 Burke Marshall ordered an FBI-investigation, which was executed a full week later. The report omitted Moses’ cuts, his doctor’s visit, and, despite FBI policy, his wounds were not photographed. The Justice Department reported it could do little because “it occurred in the streets” so any connection to voter registration was circumstantial. Slowly it dawned on the SNCC-workers that “we were out there fighting by ourselves.” Moses thus ended the month having “met the Mississippi of Harlem nightmares.” Yet, he reflected later, locals like Knox, Dawson, Weathersbee, Bryant, and Steptoe had also shown him “the Mississippi of unexpected Black strength.”<sup>43</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 55; *Freedom On My Mind*, directed by Connie Field and Marilyn Mulford, Clarity Educational Productions, 1994.

<sup>41</sup> Lynd, “Mississippi: 1961-1962,” 10; Newfield, *A Prophetic Minority*, 76; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 498-499; Affidavit Robert Parris Moses, September 27, 1961, File #0186, Reel 40, Series XV, State Project Files, SNCC Papers; C.L. McGowan to Mr. Rosen, Memorandum, September 28, 1961, Box 106, and Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, July 30, 1984, Taylor Branch Papers; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 52; Hayden, *Revolution in Mississippi*, 11-12.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*; Forman, *The Making of Revolutionaries*, 229; Claude Sitton, “Negro Vote Drive in Mississippi Is Set Back As Violence Erupts,” *New York Times*, October 24, 1961; Newfield, *A Prophetic Minority*, 76. In Moses’ field report represented in Forman’s autobiography it is mentioned that both Knox and Dawson testified during the trial as well.

<sup>43</sup> Doar and Landsberg, “The Performance of the FBI in Investigating Violations of Federal Laws Protecting the Right to Vote – 1960-1967.”; Burke Marshall to FBI Director, Memorandum, September 1, 1961, and “Statements Moses to FBI,” September 9, 1961, and FBI Director to local SAC, letter, September 5, 1961, Box 106 and Box 108, Folder 3, Taylor Branch Papers; Hammerback and Jensen, “Calling Washington Collect,” in *Civil Rights Rhetoric and the American Presidency*, eds. Aune and Rigsby, 141-142; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 26.

## 4.2. You Killed My Husband

On the day of Moses' beating fifteen students of the Pike County Nonviolent Movement had planned a sit-in at the Woolworth's lunch counter<sup>44</sup>. Only Curtis Hayes and Hollis Watkins showed up, but they followed through and were jailed. The next day five others sat-in at the bus station lunch counter and three—Robert Talbert, Ike Lewis, and Brenda Travis—were subsequently jailed. Travis, only fifteen, had lied about her age to be allowed to participate. Moses later stated that at the mass meeting the night before she had “kept staring at me.” He therefore believed that “the sight of my battered and bandaged head triggered some great outrage in Brenda,” causing her to sit-in. He knew her age—she had canvassed with him daily—but in his absence she had turned to SNCC's direct action proponents who believed her lie. Her arrest triggered outrage everywhere: blacks renounced whites for jailing a teenager and whites castigated blacks for using a child. The more moderate NAACP leaders, having solely consented to voter registration, were so upset that Moses could not stay at Bryant's house anymore and Amzie Moore had to mediate between the groups. The five students spent over a month in jail until \$5,000 in bail was raised.<sup>45</sup>

Moses had also been ambivalent about the sit-ins. Little direct action had occurred in the Deep South and its consequences had yet to be discovered. His 1983 interpretation of the events, however, show his growing understanding of what ‘facilitating grassroots activism’ entailed in practice: locals had to follow “their own ideas, not mine.” While “never [having] initiated” direct action, he understood “it was important for the young people” frustrated with his slow organizing pace: “[T]hey couldn't vote, they couldn't register, they were not old enough. And they were faced with the intransigence of the adults. They were itching to do something themselves...it was a release for them”—a feeling he knew from Newport News. He therefore “couldn't have any objections...as long as you had local people who wanted to carry the burden and the action, then it would seem to me you were moving forward...I was glad to see them have a chance to get into something that they were enthusiastic about.” This corresponded with Ella Baker's idea that decisions should be made by those who executed them, even if failure surely followed. This was the hardest part of participatory democracy. Everyone in SNCC had to deal with it, Charles Sherrod explained in 2010: “A lot of times I'm against the whole project that came up. And yet when the whole group says 'let's do it,' I got to make it happen. That's the most difficult thing that you can ever come on to as a leader.”<sup>46</sup>

Despite the resulting erosion of support SNCC persevered. On September 5 Moses and Britt again accompanied four locals to Liberty. Told to wait outside, Britt recorded how several whites approached them: one ranted at Moses “how he should be ashamed coming down here from New York stirring up trouble, causing poor innocent people to lose their jobs and homes.” Moses asked why people should lose their homes for wanting to register, but the man kept yelling while he sat silently on the porch's stoop. He later said his “only reaction to this in all these instances is simply to shut up, to be silent. I get very, very depressed.” Another man then began punching Britt. His affidavit reads he hit him fifteen times in his face before trying to choke him. Moses walked “towards the sheriff's office [but] was cut off.” Although both remained nonviolent, Britt disclosed in 1962 that this was practical: if he had retaliated “I would have been lynched by the others. They were waiting for me to do something like that.” When the man released Britt,

<sup>44</sup> SNCC first recommended the library but watchful personnel closed it down. Hollis Watkins said that the choice of the public library as a “good place” was decided by SNCC's direct action wing and that they “were told” to go there. (Hollis Watkins, interview by Robert Wright, August 5, 1968, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University). Yet there is no documentation which illuminates the degree of activist coaching in the sit-in decisions.

<sup>45</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 106-107; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 119-120; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 52-53; Lynd, “Mississippi: 1961-1962,” 10-11; Moses interview Carson, 1982; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, July 30, 1984, Taylor Branch Papers; Cagin and Dray, *We Are Not Afraid*, 151; Hollis Watkins, interview by Robert Wright, August 5, 1968, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University.

<sup>46</sup> Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 52; Moses interview Dittmer, 1983 (See also Dittmer, *Local People*, 107); Charles Sherrod, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 16, 2010.

Moses grabbed him. They and the four applicants, who were all rejected, returned to McComb. John Doar later wrote that it “would have been easy for the FBI to identify” the men, but it “waited two more weeks, until the Civil Rights Division made a specific request.”<sup>47</sup>

The other SNCC-workers had similar experiences. On September 7 John Hardy took two blacks to register in Tylertown, but both were refused. When asked why, registrar John Wood hit Hardy on the head with a pistol. Bleeding, he went to the sheriff, but he arrested Hardy instead (but altered the charges three times). He was jailed in Magnolia, next to the sit-in students. Moses visited them for the first time. Although it was hot, they could not take baths, and one policeman had threatened Watkins with a hanging, Moses wrote that he found “their spirits...good.” He also agreed to escort Hardy to his trial on September 22 despite being “tired and a little shook” about returning to Walthall. There they discovered that the trial had been postponed, and that until it started Hardy was free on bail. When trying to leave, Moses recorded, a hostile group of whites before the courthouse grabbed Hardy and made “nasty remarks.” The two managed to reach their car, but found the door stuck. A policeman told them to hurry “because he could only hold up the [whites] for so long.” Finally getting the door open they “backed out into the mob” and left while carefully observing the speed limit. After that locals refused to register. For the rest of September, Moses noted in 1962, “we just had a tough time. Wasn’t much we could do.”<sup>48</sup>

The federal government had successfully blocked Hardy’s trial<sup>49</sup>. Having been beaten inside the registrar’s office by the registrar, John Doar wrote, the connection “with voter registration was clear, and the conduct of the officials, blatant.” *The New York Times* praised this unprecedented step as “an important element in the civil rights battle in the South.” Black and white papers alike, like *The Afro-American* and *The Clarion-Ledger*, printed Robert Kennedy’s strong support for the constitutional right to register without “fear of coercion, intimidation or physical harm. It is our responsibility to maintain that right.” But state officials were unaffected: registrar John Wood warned *The New York Times* that “[t]he Federal Government, through our Attorney General, will eventually cause bloodshed between the races.”<sup>50</sup>

Worried, the Justice Department began investigations in McComb on September 11, gathering more documentation within five days than the FBI had in a month. Moses documented that the Department “dug out information about [regular] meetings between the whites...We believe that as a result of the meetings, the beatings of Aug. 29<sup>th</sup> and Sept. 5<sup>th</sup> occurred.” On September 23 Doar came from Washington to personally investigate conditions in southwest Mississippi, a place he likened to “going back into the nineteenth century.” He met Moses for the first time on Steptoe’s farm. He had falsely assumed that Moses had exaggerated his injuries in his letters. Consequently, Taylor Branch noted, he learned “to reevaluate the quality of the FBI reporting” and “Moses’ character.” Doar “instructed to have Agents immediately interview” Dr. Anderson and finally photograph the wounds. It took another two months of FBI investigations before the Caston-case was closed, without results. Reinterviewed by the agent from

<sup>47</sup> Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 229-230; Lynd, “Mississippi: 1961-1962,” 11-12; Travis Britt, Affidavit, File #0191, no date, Reel 40, Series XV, State Project Files, SNCC Papers; Fred Halstead, “Trying to Vote in the Delta Takes Nerve,” February 26, 1962, private collection Joan Mulholland; Doar and Landsberg, “The Performance of the FBI in Investigating Violations of Federal Laws Protecting the Right to Vote—1960-1967.”

<sup>48</sup> Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 228, 230-231; Lynd, “Mississippi: 1961-1962,” 11-12; John Hardy, “Racist Violence Increasing as Students Push Civil Rights Effort in South,” *New University News*, 1962.

<sup>49</sup> The Justice Department, citing violations of the 1957 Civil Rights Act, blocked the trial by obtaining an injunction from an Alabama judge in the middle of the night, after Mississippi judge Harold Cox, a close relation of Senator James Eastland, first ruled against it.

<sup>50</sup> Doar and Landsberg, “The Performance of the FBI in Investigating Violations of Federal Laws Protecting the Right to Vote—1960-1967”; Claude Sitton, “Negro Vote Drive in Mississippi Is Set Back After Violence Erupts,” and Anthony Lewis, “Negro Vote Drive Wins A Court Test,” *New York Times*, October 24 and 30, 1961; “U.S. Seeks To Curb Vote Interference,” *Afro*, September 26, 1961; “‘Bobby’ Moves Against Walthall Vote Officials,” *The Clarion Ledger*, September 21, 1961; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 230-231; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 507-508.

Natchez, Moses said he tried to “convince me that I really hadn’t been beaten but had fell,” which he reported to Doar. When photographing his wounds the agent warned Moses he “could shoot whoever complained about not conducting complete and thorough investigations.” The agent denied this, which his colleagues conveniently corroborated. FBI Assistant Director Al Rosen wrote Doar “that Moses’ comments are not supported by the information we have” and warned “to be most careful in our contacts with Moses as we know that he has a propensity for creating problems.” Unsurprisingly, Moses later remarked, locals’ faces “lit up when John Doar and the Justice Department came...[It was] so different from when a local resident FBI agent came.”<sup>51</sup>

At the farm Moses and Steptoe informed Doar of their concerns, particularly regarding the Castons and Steptoe’s neighbor, Billy Jack’s father-in-law, state representative E.H. Hurst. A November FBI interview with Moses highlighted that after the Caston-beating several locals, including Steptoe, had been told to pay off any debts, and that Knox’ son-in-law had been fired. On September 14 Moses agreed to give a “general ‘pep-talk’” at a church revival meeting, but he had decided not to go when Justice Department attorneys informed him they saw police officers gathering license numbers outside the church. Steptoe confirmed that the deputy sheriff collected the numbers and “asked if Moses was in.” Before flying home Doar asked to see Herbert Lee, but he was out. Meanwhile one of his daughters received an anonymous call at his brother’s Frank’s house that warned that Lee, Steptoe, and farmer and movement supporter George Reese would be killed, a thought Steptoe had impressed on Doar too. To the FBI, however, Frank Lee wisely denied any call was made—two days after the threat was partially executed.<sup>52</sup>

On the morning of September 25, Hurst, driving Caston’s truck, followed Herbert Lee to the cotton gin and parked next to him. Lee exited his car through the passenger side, after which Hurst ran past both trucks and started arguing. Hurst claimed Lee tried to attack him with a tire-iron, so he hit him on the head with a pistol, which accidentally fired and killed Lee. Dr. Anderson inspected Lee’s body hours after everyone else refused to touch it and Moses and Charles McDew had identified him. A coroner’s jury exonerated Hurst the next day, claiming justifiable self-defense. Sheriff Caston and the town marshal, the first at the crime scene, claimed they found a tire-iron under Lee’s body. The alleged motivation for the quarrel was a \$500 debt Lee owed Hurst since five years but which was not due until December. Hurst requested the money as a ‘service fee’ for buying land on Lee’s behalf since blacks were charged more than whites. In reality, Hurst, a childhood friend of Lee’s and Steptoe’s, had resented them since their farming became more successful “than Hurst thought appropriate” for blacks. Their civil rights activism encouraged it. Britt said in 1962 that shortly before his death “Lee had been around trying to borrow \$500 fast” because he was told he “better pay up right away.”<sup>53</sup>

For several nights Moses toured the area with Steptoe or Moore to interview witnesses, in continuity with Medgar Evers’ and Amzie Moore’s tactics after Emmett Till’s murder. In 1994 he recalled the night-riding as “really very scary. You were afraid of every headlight that came up.” Driving with Moore was

<sup>51</sup> Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 231; John Doar, “The Work of the Civil Rights Division in Enforcing Voting Rights Under the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1960,” *Florida State University Law Review* 25, no. 1 (Fall 1997): 4; Kenneth O’Reilly, *Racial Matters: The FBI’s Secret File on Black America, 1960-1972* (New York: Free Press, 1989), 68; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 509; Hammerback and Jensen, “Calling Washington Collect,” in *Civil Rights Rhetoric and the American Presidency*, eds. Aune and Rigsby, 141-142; SAC New Orleans to Director FBI, memorandum, November 24, 1961, and A. Rosen to Mr. McGowan, memorandum, November 30, 1961, and SA to SAC, New Orleans, memorandum, November 22, 1961, and C.L. McGowan to Mr. Rosen, memorandum, September 28, 1961, Box 106, and Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 11, 1983, Taylor Branch Papers.

<sup>52</sup> Robert Paris Moses to FBI from Pike County Jail, report, November 6, 1961, Box 106, and Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, July 30, 1984, Taylor Branch Papers.

<sup>53</sup> Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 510; Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 121-123; FBI, report, October 2, 1961, Box 106, Taylor Branch Papers; Fred Halstead, “Trying to Vote in the Delta Takes Nerve...Interview with Travis Britt,” February 26, 1962, private collection Joan Mulholland.

especially dangerous because, being unfamiliar with the county, they might “pull into the drive of a white farm and get ourselves lynched.” In 1995 Steptoe’s son asserted that Moses nonetheless told his father that if he brought a gun “we just won’t go.” During these tours several black witnesses, including 44-year-old logger and veteran Louis Allen, outlined inconsistencies in Hurst’s story: Lee had not had a tire iron, his small physique defied the logic of initiating a fight, and Hurst had evidently “lowered the gun at him.” Anderson confirmed that Lee’s body showed no powder burns, implying he indeed was not shot from close-range. Allen stated that white officers forced him to testify that Hurst fired in self-defense: “At the coroner’s jury, they asked me about the piece of iron. I said I hadn’t seen no iron. ‘Is this the piece of iron?’ I said ‘yes.’”<sup>54</sup>

Despite Doar’s multiple requests, the FBI’s slow bureaucracy (with no office in Mississippi, requests first had to go through the New Orleans office) and dependence on biased local agents ensured no action until after Lee’s burial, although it refused an exhumation to “affirm or refute the witnesses.” The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission also followed investigations, insisting that Hurst shot in self-defense and that Moses had “falsified his statement to [the] Justice Department.” The Department nevertheless prepared suits against the sheriff, his son, three deputies, the chief of police, the town marshal, a highway patrolman, and others who “encouraged white citizens to intimidate black [registration] applicants.” Yet “these suits were never filed,” John Doar wrote, for fear of “uncontrollable violence.” This would expend the Civil Rights Division’s “limited resources, and we would have had little left for the rest of Mississippi.” Moreover, the connection between Lee’s death and activism was indirect, so the Department treated the murder “as a criminal matter,” and was “unable to establish the state involvement required for federal prosecution.”<sup>55</sup>

On October 13 Louis Allen told Moses that he wanted to tell the truth at a grand jury hearing that examined the coroner’s jury’s findings. Moses, Doar wrote, “inquired whether under federal law... Allen could be protected. We said no.” Moses, repudiating his own philosophies, then counseled against the testimony, although Doar told the FBI to reopen the case. They in turn informed local officers of Allen’s about-face. Despite upholding his first testimony at the grand jury, Moses said, Allen then “was just a marked man.” Retelling events in 1983, he claimed it had felt “like you’re setting people up” because he was “not sure that [Allen] understood what was happening.” After that, the interviewer recorded, “Moses [was] silent a long time.” The issue reached the core of his leadership dilemma: as with the sit-ins, it was progress if a local wanted to carry the action and its burden, but was his encouragement a form of manipulation if that person did not understand the implications? Was he complicit in what happened afterwards? Whites stopped their business with Allen and cut off his credit. Six months later a deputy sheriff broke his jaw with a flash light. Harassments followed two more years—until whites killed him in an ambush in 1964. What happened to Lee and Allen, Doar wrote in 1997, “remain[s] on our consciences, not because we could have done something about these terrible crimes, but because there was no federal statute at the time that permitted us to proceed with a prosecution.”<sup>56</sup>

<sup>54</sup> *Freedom On My Mind*, directed by Connie Field and Marilyn Mulford, Clarity Educational Productions, 1994; Eldridge W. Steptoe, Jr., interview by Jimmy Dykes, November 14, 1995, transcript Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi Collection, University of Southern Mississippi; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 50; Lynd, “Mississippi: 1961-1962,” 12-13; “Mississippi Negro Witnessed Slaying; Shotgunned to Death,” SNCC newsletter, February 2, 1964, File #0096, Reel 14, Series VII Communications Department, Public Relations, SNCC Papers. For tactics used by Medgar Evers and Amzie Moore during Emmett Till case, see among others Myrlie Evers-Williams and Manning Marable, eds., *The Autobiography of Medgar Evers: A Hero’s Life and Legacy Revealed Through His Writings, Letters, and Speeches* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2005), 15-16.

<sup>55</sup> Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 510-511, 520-522; A.L. Hopkins, “Conference with Sheriff E.L. Caston, Amite County, Attorney T.F. Badon, and District Attorney regarding the death of Herbert Lee,” investigative report, September 26, 1961, Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission Online, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, MS, [http://mdah.state.ms.us/arrec/digital\\_archives/sovcom/](http://mdah.state.ms.us/arrec/digital_archives/sovcom/) (accessed November 22, 2007); Doar, “The Work of the Civil Rights Division in Enforcing Voting Rights Under the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1960,” 6-7.

<sup>56</sup> “The Work of the Civil Rights Division in Enforcing Voting Rights Under the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1960,” 6-7; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 11, 1983, Taylor Branch Papers; Newsletter Southern Conference Educational Fund, August 9, 1962, private collection Joan Mulholland.

Lee's murder infuriated the black community. Britt told a reporter in 1962 that locals raised money for Lee's widow, while others discussed wanting "to even things up" by forming "some kind of adult violent organization." Other locals became even more afraid, whereas the Justice Department's presence emboldened others. Meanwhile SNCC-workers faced their own guilt about the murder, worsened by the story of Lee's funeral where his widow pounded her chest and shouted at Moses and Charles McDew: "You killed my husband! You killed my husband!" While included in his semi-autobiography, Moses cannot remember whether this actually happened, but McDew and others insist it did. SNCC-workers felt responsible regardless, Moses stated in 1964: "[Lee] was killed just as surely because we went in there to organize as rain comes because [of] the clouds." Yet Lee likely surfaced on whites' radars before his arrival. Fifty-two-year-old Lee was illiterate but, according to Charles Payne, always felt self-empowered: he traded his dairy products in Louisiana to avoid getting cheated in local stores, shunned stores that might invite racial slurs, and refused his children's employment outside his farm. Consequently some felt "he was putting on airs." More significantly, he openly belonged to the NAACP, even during the bloody 1950s. With Lee's death, Steptoe wrote Roy Wilkins, the branch "suffered a serious loss...Lee was one of the strongest members and had been since 1953."<sup>57</sup>

SNCC nonetheless saw the murder as part of an escalating pattern. As Moses stated in 1986, "clearly we were acting as some kind of buffer because the initial physical violence was always directed at us...when that didn't work, then you began to get violence directed at the people." This invited intense soul-searching because "it's one thing to get beat up and it's another thing to be responsible, or to participate in some way in a killing." In 1962 Moses emotionally recalled "reading very bitterly" in the *Enterprise Journal* that Lee "was shot in self-defense...That was it. You might have thought he had been a bum. There was no mention that Lee was a farmer, that he had a family, that he had nine kids, beautiful kids, [and] been a very substantial citizen. It was as if he had been drunk or something and had gotten into fight and gotten shot." He then wrote a short article entitled 'Another Man Done Gone' for the local NAACP bulletin. Gloster Current asked to reprint it in its national paper *The Crisis*. It focused entirely on Lee, who was "plain spoken, forthright, conscious of his lack of education but anxious to learn whatever was necessary...to register." Citing the background of his wife of 22 years and the education levels of his children, he stressed that one daughter had "to abandon her education now to help her mother." With Moses' aid SNCC then helped another daughter get a scholarship. Worried for Steptoe's son as well, SNCC later arranged a scholarship for him in Boston.<sup>58</sup>

Moses' article could be considered evidence of his budding realization of the workings of the media and its faceless portrayal of local blacks. While expected in the southern white press, it unintentionally also became emblematic of the writings of movement supporters. Accounts by white liberals seemed to emphasize Lee's and Allen's murders in order to highlight the dangerous context in

<sup>57</sup> Fred Halstead, "A Man Is Killed in Cold Blood," March 5, 1962, private collection Joan Mulholland; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 50; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 510; Charles McDew, interview by Katherine Shannon, August 24, 1967, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University; Phil Alden Robinson, telephone interview by author, April 30, 2010; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, July 30, 1984, Taylor Branch Papers; Bob Moses, "Speech," (West Coast Civil Rights Conference, April 23, 1964), transcript, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, University of Southern Mississippi; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 121; E.W. Steptoe to Roy Wilkins, letter, no date, Reel 10, Group III, Box C-73, Part 27 Selected Branch Files, Records NAACP.

<sup>58</sup> Robert Moses, interview by Blackside, Inc., May 19, 1986, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries, St. Louis, Missouri; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 121; Charles McDew, interview by Katherine Shannon, August 24, 1967, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University; Lynd, "Mississippi: 1961-1962," 12-13; Robert Parris Moses, "Another Man Done Gone," *The Informer*, no date, William Heath Papers\*; Gloster Current, request, no date, Reel 10, Group III, Box C-73, Part 27 Selected Branch Files, Microfilm, Records NAACP. \*William Heath kindly let me research his papers at his home in 2008. They have since been moved to the Wisconsin State Historical Society and re-catalogued. It is therefore impossible to record box and folder numbers as they are no longer up to date.



which Moses and SNCC worked. They also dwelled upon how SNCC-workers coped with their emotions. Their portrayal of Moses as, in Jack Newfield's words, "tormented by the shadows of guilt" helped to create a romantic aura around him—one that symbolized the sacrifices of the SNCC-workers, rather than those of the Lee and Allen families. As one SNCC-volunteer said in 2008: "[Moses] went through such terrible situations...once you knew that, you were [even] more impressed with his ability to carry on."<sup>59</sup>

Moses' article could be viewed as an early example of Moses' determination to shift the emphasis to where he thought it belonged: with local people. This was definitely his intent when SCEF asked him to write about SNCC's McComb experiences for its February 1962 issue of *The Southern Patriot*. Starting with a quote from Camus' *The Plague*, he wrote about a Mississippi black activist named Birdia Keglar<sup>60</sup>. Represented by Doar and accompanied by Moses, Moore, and some Rust College students, she had testified in court on December 20 that the local sheriff had prevented her from paying her poll tax. While including that when Moses and Moore visited her at night on December 18 they had "inched along" a flooded road, the rest was solely about Keglar. SCEF's editorial underscored Moses' deliberate choice to focus on Keglar rather than SNCC: "Obviously he thinks this is the key to Mississippi today—the individual courage, the lonely decisions, of its citizens." Yet SCEF's editors captured both a sense of discontinuity with previous activism and the impact of full-time activists by concluding: "Perhaps he is right. But it should also be said that history will surely record the turning point in Mississippi as 1961—when a group of selfless students decided it was time for this state to rejoin the Union."<sup>61</sup>

Taking the Lee-article purely on its surface intent—a tribute to a NAACP-member in his organization's paper—it nonetheless showed Moses' deep respect for Lee. Even today his death "still greatly pains him." As Moses explained in 1991 to one of Lee's daughters: "When one of you died, part of us died." He thereby revealed that he saw locals not just as equals, but as *family*. Moses felt this was the essence of the McComb experience: "Everywhere we went, [we] were adopted and nurtured, even protected as though we were family [and] that closeness rendered moot the label of 'outside agitator.'" Moses' stress on creating family connections also signaled his own inherent drive for aligning with like-minded people and a sense of continuity with previous activism: "[O]ur young generation was dynamically linked to a rooted older generation who passed on wisdom, encouragement, and concrete aid when possible. This was empowering." The feelings of locals were mutual, Luvahgn Brown claimed in 2011: "We bonded and looked after each other. It [was] like a war where the men fighting will form very close ties with those on the battlefield, especially their sergeants...Our survival depended on each other."<sup>62</sup>

A Lee family friend told the *Enterprise Journal* in November 2010, when a McComb landmark was dedicated to Lee, that his murder "changed our lives as well as many others in Amite County, and possibly all over the nation." Throughout the sixties Moses argued for the latter. Mary King stated that he "told Lee's story often...as with everyone else who knew Bob Moses, Lee's death had a serious impact on me through Bob." In 1965 Jack Newfield recorded how Moses had "tried to make Herbert Lee a symbol for all the hundreds of Mississippi Negroes who have been lawlessly murdered by whites. Whenever he

<sup>59</sup> Newfield, *A Prophetic Minority*, 81; Lisa Anderson Todd, interview by author, Washington, DC, October 23, 2008.

<sup>60</sup> Birdia Keglar, a black woman born in Charleston, Mississippi, in 1908, was a long-time activist. After suing the local sheriff, she opened her home to the young SNCC-workers but also initiated the first NAACP branch in Tallahatchie County in 1963. In 1966 she was killed in a car-crash widely believed to have been caused by the KKK.

<sup>61</sup> Bob Moses, untitled story for *The Southern Patriot*, February 1962, and editorial comments, Files #0884-0886, and Anne Braden to Bob Moses, letter, February 6, 1962 File #0520, Reel 9, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers.

<sup>62</sup> Phil Alden Robinson, telephone interview by author, April 30, 2010; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 18, 56; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 128-129; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Charles Payne, August 1993, in *Debating the Civil Rights Movement*, Lawson and Payne, 138, 184; Luvahgn Brown, email interview by author, January 13, 2011. The reunion was organized at Moses' initiative for the movie *Freedom Song*, based on the McComb experience and released in 2000, directed by Phil Alden Robinson to allow Robinson to reconstruct the story more accurately by listening to the people that were actually involved.

spoke in the North...he would talk about Herbert Lee, and soon thousands of young people knew of this one murder out of many.” In 1964 SNCC planned a community center in Greenville called the “Herbert Lee Memorial Community Center.” In 1987 Todd Gitlin underscored the poignancy of the movement’s commitment to compensate the media’s lack of interest in faceless black victims: “Lee was memorialized in a civil rights song [*We’ll Never Turn Back*, SNCC’s anthem in Mississippi] and in Bob Moses’s talks on the campuses of the North, not on the front page of *The New York Times*.” Nonetheless, Amzie Moore claimed, to McComb insiders “Bob never really talked about whatever was happening. It happened, and whoever was there knew what had happened.”<sup>63</sup>

Moses’ fixation on Lee was indicative of his sensitive character. In 2008 Julian Bond contended that Lee’s and Allen’s deaths were a “greater blow to him...than to the rest of us in SNCC” because he took them “in a much more personal way.” Many in movement leadership positions, including Martin Luther King and Stokely Carmichael, struggled with tactics that risked innocent lives. This internal stress, however, probably affected Moses even more due to his fascination with moral purity. He could not but see himself as an executioner, he told Northern whites in 1964: “What does it mean to be involved in that kind of action which might precipitate that kind of [death?]...Camus poses it on a historical scale in terms of [whether] people who are enslaved, in order to get their freedom, have to become executioners and participate in acts of terror and death...And [this] takes place on maybe a very small scale down South in terms of that kind of activity which we carry on.” This moral anguish made him less suitable for the requirements of leadership, Taylor Branch argued: “King was more like General Sherman when his people were killed, and you need this toughness to keep going. It tore Moses apart.” Simultaneously it was exactly this sensitivity that drew people to him. Curtis Hayes claimed that “[seeing] him sad was...enough for me to go and find the cat that killed Herbert Lee myself.”<sup>64</sup>

Camus’ teachings solidified Moses’ perseverance. He recounted later: “[T]here’s a real moral question in terms of involvement of other people. One way [to deal with this is] to be very careful about telling people about the risks involved” and another was sharing their exposure: “Everything that you’re asking people to do, you’re doing yourself.” While his doubts “seemed about to immobilize me,” he decided that continuing “was the only way to make any sense” of Lee’s death. The “feeling that maybe this is all kind of using somebody” could be eased if “I honor their demise with my life.” Accordingly “Lee sort of symbolized [our] signing over in blood to the struggle, so that it was clear now that they will have to kill us to get us out of here.”<sup>65</sup>

After September, Moses said they “would have been very, very, very beat down except that we didn’t have the time.” In McComb tensions had heated up when the sit-in students were bailed out on October 3. Next to SCLC, the NAACP paid \$2,500, with Roy Wilkins demanding NAACP-involvement in a letter to SNCC “otherwise the bills will have to be paid by those who plan and launch.” More SNCC-workers, like Charles Jones, Charles Sherrod, and Cordell Reagon, had come to give momentum to McComb’s

<sup>63</sup> Ernest Herndon, “‘Iconic Day’ in Liberty,” *McComb-Enterprise Journal*, November 29, 2010; King, *Freedom Song*, 146, 150; Newfield, *A Prophetic Minority*, 81; Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 151; Amzie Moore, interview by Michael Garvey, March 29 and April 13, 1977, transcript Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi Collection, University of Southern Mississippi.

<sup>64</sup> Julian Bond, interview by author, Washington DC, October 27, 2008; Bob Moses, “Speech,” (West Coast Civil Rights Conference, April 23, 1964), transcript, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, University of Southern Mississippi, Jackson, MS; Taylor Branch in Julia Cass, “The Moses Factor,” *Mother Jones*, May/June 2002, <http://motherjones.com/politics/2002/05/moses-factor> (accessed May 12, 2008); *Freedom On My Mind*, directed by Connie Field and Marilyn Mulford, Clarity Educational Productions, 1994.

<sup>65</sup> *Freedom On My Mind*, directed by Connie Field and Marilyn Mulford, Clarity Educational Productions, 1994; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, July 30, 1984, Taylor Branch Papers; Bob Moses, “Speech,” (West Coast Civil Rights Conference, April 23, 1964), transcript, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, University of Southern Mississippi, Jackson, MS; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 51; Russell, *Black Genius and the American Experience*, 331; William Blake, *The Children of the Movement* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2004), 43-44.

growing movement. Moses still stayed at Steptoe's, a daring sign of the latter's commitment. Steptoe's dedication to self-defense nonetheless intensified, which made Moses increasingly uncomfortable. He therefore returned to McComb, which "offered some breathing room, a place to sort out my thoughts."<sup>66</sup>

Meanwhile, the day after their release from jail, Burgland High School expelled Brenda Travis and Ike Lewis. Angered, over 100 students walked out to the Masonic Temple, inviting the SNCC-workers to join their march to the Magnolia courthouse to protest Lee's death and voting rights violations. Most historians consider what Taylor Branch termed this "spontaneous march" evidence of a successful grassroots-led movement in McComb. As Charles McDew paraphrased Gandhi, it was almost like "there go our people. We have to hurry and catch up with them." Yet factually the march, like the sit-ins, was more a two-way merger of local initiative and professional coaching than the movement at the time maintained. Even Moses, who in his semi-autobiography called the students' arrival a "sudden tidal surge," privately disclosed that "we have had more responsibility for these kids than we've publicly acknowledged."<sup>67</sup>

There are several indications of SNCC's influence, although its actual extent remains uncertain. The fact that other SNCC-workers came to town anticipating a protest, Moses claimed in 1982, in itself suggested that the "march was planned, because Jones came down to get the publicity out." Yet at the time he was unaware of the extent of SNCC's direct action wing's involvement, which, Charles Jones confessed in 1991, they "purposefully did not tell." This reflects the rivalry that still existed between SNCC's direct action and voter registration groups (although Jones officially headed voter registration) and their autonomy from Moses. Bob Zellner, a white student from Alabama, wrote he and other SNCC staff came to McComb that morning to ratify the decision to do both voter registration *and* direct action, and whether "Moses and the others doing voter registration would do it as part of SNCC." This again implies that most SNCC-workers defined direct action as its core function and neither embraced Moses nor his approach yet as their quintessential representation.<sup>68</sup>

Transcripts of a 1991 reunion<sup>69</sup> show that SNCC's direct action wing used a mass meeting the night before to advise the teenagers on possible actions. One participant said they heard rumors about Brenda's possible expulsion and then decided that if true, "we were going to walk out." But James Bevel's speech at the meeting accelerated the decision. According to Dr. Anderson, Bevel "got the kids excited," after which they "stayed around [and] did some planning." He tellingly called Bevel the "Pied Piper." Jones agreed: "Bevel was there encouraging [it] if you want to get down to that level of it." Another participant put it like this: "Bevel didn't put us up...We knew then we were going to do something regardless...he didn't say 'you'all do this,' he just excited us and just gave us the thought. We acted on that on our own."<sup>70</sup>

Still SNCC was in on it from the start. Jones stated: "We stayed up...with spirits as high as you could get because we knew something was going to happen." They anticipated a big demonstration because "we assisted in getting the material," like signs and pamphlets. The signs were stored at the

<sup>66</sup> Lynd, "Mississippi: 1961-1962," 13-14; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 511; Roy Wilkins to Ed King, letter, September 1, 1961; Dittmer, *Local People*, 112; Evers-Williams and Manning, *The Autobiography of Medgar Evers*, 238.

<sup>67</sup> Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 511-512; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 51-53; Phil Alden Robinson, telephone interview by author, April 30, 2010; Zellner, *The Wrong Side of Murder Creek*, 151-152.

<sup>68</sup> Moses interview Carson, March 29-30, 1982; Phil Alden Robinson, telephone interview by author, April 30, 2010; transcripts *Freedom Song* reunion, in author's possession.

<sup>69</sup> The reunion was organized for the movie *Freedom Song* between June 27-30, 1991, because Moses, who read several drafts of the script, had advised director Phil Alden Robinson to make the movie about the McComb locals rather than him because his role was "not important." Rather than creating a Hollywood production, he asked Robinson to "sign onto our process" by letting locals "tell what happened and go with that," which was the "1960's movement style." With some exceptions, like James Bevel, all the locals and SNCC-workers that played a role in the 1961 events attended. Robinson and Moses agreed that no-one should profit from the movie. They organized the Mississippi Community Foundation to which the locals signed off their story rights, and the studios in turn paid the Foundation. Nonetheless, the purist Moses insisted that the movie was set in a fictional town, because he could not guarantee who accurately had said or done what in 1961. (Phil Alden Robinson, telephone interview by author, April 30, 2010)

<sup>70</sup> Transcripts *Freedom Song* reunion, in author's possession.

Masonic Temple that night and the students marched there first to pick them up. Those in SNCC unaware of the direct action's group help accordingly knew beforehand that the students would come, which Robinson, Sherrod, and Jones admitted. As Dr. Anderson said: "The office wasn't that big for those signs to be up there," implying they could not have missed seeing them. As Jones summarized: "We were trying not to be out front of it, we were trying not to lead it, we did not want to be seen as the persons doing it, but we were totally aware of it."<sup>71</sup>

Confronted with the students at the Temple, the SNCC-workers knew that someone had "to direct these kids or they're going to get their heads busted." But Moses and McDew opposed marching, fearing violence and losing the adults' support and their staff to long jail sentences. But after speaking with some high school seniors Moses realized he "didn't have any control about marching, the students." He acquiesced to his belief that "whatever the group decides you should do," since "there was no way we could ignore [their demand for support] or refuse it." Moreover, they specifically asked *his*: "[I]t was clear from the way that they were asking that it was important to them that I go...Not just McDew and people that they really didn't know who were coming in for the demonstration." He, McDew, and Zellner then agreed, but advised to march to the City Hall instead, because Magnolia was eight miles away and it was already late in the afternoon. The students agreed while SNCC assisted them with more material. One teenager said they advised not to walk on the grass or beside the sidewalk, but felt that "the seniors from the high school [were] leading us more so than SNCC taking over." Jones stayed behind to get the news out; to avoid arrest he even dressed up as a butcher and called news-outlets from the butcher's store.<sup>72</sup>

When the group reached City Hall, a white mob was already waiting. Curtis Hayes walked up the steps and asked the students to pray. After uttering "Oh, Lord," he was arrested. Hollis Watkins followed Hayes' example, but suffered the same fate. This ritual continued one student after another, including Brenda Travis, until police arrested all 114 for disturbing the peace<sup>73</sup>. The mob then zoomed in on Zellner. As the only white, his sight particularly enraged the mob. Whites began choking and punching him—one even tried to gauge his eyes out—but Moses and McDew took the beating by nonviolently shielding Zellner's body. Meanwhile the FBI and police stood by passively. The three were kicked until police finally interfered—by arresting the bloodied SNCC-workers.<sup>74</sup>

The march—according to one historian "the first of its kind in Mississippi since Reconstruction"—caused a national uproar. *The New York Times* focused chiefly on Zellner, by whom "[t]he students were led." Details followed in later articles, but the general emphasis lay on the SNCC-workers with Moses now identified as "the leader." Southern whites also focused on the 'outside' forces in the march. In the *Enterprise Journal* John Emmerich's son Oliver charged: "What is happening to our community when children march on City Hall under the leadership of outside agitators?...The Negro people will accomplish nothing by resorting to such child-like tactics." The mayor insisted that until their arrival the "races have lived together peacefully in McComb for eighty-eight years," and Sheriff Simmons claimed that most students "just joined in" without knowing into what. Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission reports likewise stressed how "Moses and other out-of-state agitators encouraged these students." Police Chief George Guy therefore told *The New York Times*: "Moses is a pretty shrewd damn duck."<sup>75</sup>

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*; Hayden, *Revolution in Mississippi*, 17; Dittmer, *Local People*, 110.

<sup>72</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 110; Moses interview Dittmer, 1983; Charles McDew, interview by Katherine Shannon, August 24, 1967, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University; Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 191; Arsenault, *Freedom Riders*, 450; Transcripts *Freedom Song* reunion, in author's possession.

<sup>73</sup> At trial later, one officer explained the logic: "If they hadn't been disturbing the peace, they (the white men) would never have gathered." ("Praying Disturbs the Peace in Mississippi!!" *The Liberator* 1, no. 2 (November 17, 1961): 3, private collection Joan Mulholland)

<sup>74</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, July 30, 1984, Taylor Branch Papers; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 512-513; Zellner, *The Wrong Side of Murder Creek*, 157, 160-161.

<sup>75</sup> "114 Students Arrested," "Mississippi Cases Worry U.S. Aides," "Hard-Core Segregationist City in Mississippi Is Nearing Crisis" and "Negro Vote Drive Is Set Back As Violence Erupts," *New York Times*, October 5, 11, 21, and 24,

While the *Enterprise Journal* approvingly reported that the students' parents "whaled away" at them for participating, the march's effect in the black community was double-edged. Many expressed anger at SNCC for "using" children, but the activism aroused others. That night another mass meeting was held. Even Moses disclosed that direct action "was helpful because it stimulated a lot of people [that] we were able then to translate back into the voter program...So it turned out that you could use both avenues to support each other" in the short run. C.C. Bryant, ignorant of the march, was arrested based on Guy's affidavit that he must be "behind some of this racial trouble." Released on bail and witnessing the new interest in citizenship classes Bryant proclaimed in the heat of the moment to follow "where the students lead." In subsequent days more SNCC-workers and SDS-members Tom Hayden and Paul Potter trickled into McComb, followed by Northern reporters from *The New York Times*, *Newsweek*, and others.<sup>76</sup>

### 4.3. Tremor in the Iceberg

Meanwhile the arrested marchers faced harrowing uncertainty. A white mob, carrying a noose, had taken Zellner into the countryside. Police brought in local whites to curse the others in the McComb jail's basement. They specifically targeted Moses, which he met with his distinctive survival mode: "I was again, very, very quiet." At night the students were taken upstairs, one by one. McDew claimed they feared a mass hanging. Instead, Moses recounted in 1962, there was a dark "kangaroo court" consisting of "the sheriff, the local county attorney, the local judges," who malignantly questioned them. Eventually they let 97 minors go and brought the others to the Liberty jail. Zellner had been taken to the one in Magnolia. Charles Jones, meanwhile, frantically called the Justice Department about a lynch threat that was forming against Moses, although the local FBI-agent had assured his safety. Unconvinced, Jones got Doar to come into the butcher shop that night. He said he could do little. Jones was flabbergasted: "[H]ere was...the most powerful country in the history of the world, represented in the form of John Doar, and he says... 'ain't nothing I can do.' And that pretty much completely shook me out of any illusions...about the federal government." A letter from the FBI Director to Burke Marshall the next day confirmed that the lynch threat had been real, but the sheriff had promised the FBI to "take all necessary steps to insure the safety of Moses." This notification that the federal government was watching likely saved his life.<sup>77</sup>

The Liberty cell was cold and crowded. The toilet—a hole in the ground—had overflowed. The students took turns sitting and walking around in the water and waste until they were arraigned and charged with breach of peace. The SNCC-workers were additionally charged with contributing to juvenile delinquency and Brenda Travis was sentenced to an Oakley reform school for "Negro delinquents." Pending release on bail, Moses said in 1962 they "sang songs, we drew a chessboard on the floor, took cigarette butts, made pieces and played chess." He also taught the students math and McDew taught

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1961; "McComb Police Jail Racial Marchers," October 5, 1961, and "McComb Officials Invite Bobby To See For Himself," October 10, 1961, private collection Joan Mulholland; "Jail 114 in Mississippi Who Protested Race Segregation," *Jet*, October 19, 1961; A.L. Hopkins, "Investigation of Negro Student Demonstrators, and Adult Negro Agitators, McComb, Mississippi," investigative report, October 20, 1961, and "Robert Moses, Colored Male," investigative report, April 19, 1962, Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission Online, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, MS, [http://mdah.state.ms.us/arrec/digital\\_archives/sovcom/](http://mdah.state.ms.us/arrec/digital_archives/sovcom/) (accessed November 22, 2007); Hayden, *Revolution in Mississippi*, 22.

<sup>76</sup> Cagin and Dray, *We Are Not Afraid*, 157; Dittmer, *Local People*, 111-112; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 513-514; Cobb, *On the Road to Freedom*, 286-287.

<sup>77</sup> Zellner, *The Wrong Side of Murder Creek*, 163-167; Charles McDew, interview by Katherine Shannon, August 24, 1967, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University; Lynd, "Mississippi: 1961-1962," 14; Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 40, 192; Director FBI to Burke Marshall, letter, October 5, 1961, Box 106, Taylor Branch Papers; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 513. Zellner did not have a lawyer (he fired his black attorney because he was overloaded with clients and whites refused to represent him) so his case was continued until the next term of court, then the next and eventually he was never tried for his part in the McComb student march.

history. As chairman, however, McDew bailed out early to help raise \$5,000 for the rest, which Harry Belafonte donated shortly after. Meanwhile Sherrod and Reagon had also been arrested on trumped-up charges.<sup>78</sup>

The SNCC-workers then had some time to recuperate before their trial on October 31. At Dr. Anderson's house they decided to go to Atlanta, while McDew stayed behind as a symbolic presence. After patrolling Anderson's house with guns that night, the next morning McDew found that someone taped a sign on the SNCC-office proclaiming victoriously "SNCC Done Snuck" out of town. In Atlanta the others—including Mississippi locals to expose them further to the movement—attended an emergency meeting to discuss SNCC's goals of voter registration and/or direct action now McComb proved so costly. James Forman, a Northern university trained air force veteran from Chicago with superior administrative skills, had just accepted the job of Executive Secretary. His job was to run SNCC's administrative procedures as others worked in the field. Forman later wrote that he "doubted the discipline of the group" and blamed McDew for staying in McComb and Moses for refusing to join proceedings. When everyone was asked to explain why they wanted to work fulltime for SNCC, Moses "passed" and stated he wanted to return to McComb. According to Taylor Branch, this "dampen[ed] the internal power struggle by making its issues seem petty and moot." Forman, however, felt "it would be very bad" if Moses left without "some solution" for SNCC's future, since it "suggested a lack of concern with internal organization." Moses reluctantly stayed another day. This foreshadowed the future conflicts between SNCC's administrative forces in Atlanta and its field troops, and their respective personifications, Forman and Moses.<sup>79</sup>

Back in McComb, Moses confronted the consequences of direct action. On October 10 the students returned to school to ask Brenda Travis' readmission. The authorities agreed if they signed an agreement to stop demonstrations. If not, they faced expulsion, and the next day a ten percent reduction in their grades was added to the threat. Most students refused on both occasions and walked out. At SNCC's suggestion, Tom Hayden and Paul Potter covered the walkouts to provoke federal attention. A white plumber then beat them while policemen looked on. Raising much publicity because the victims were white, the plumber was arrested and Burke Marshall invited the two to Washington.<sup>80</sup>

The Burgland students were told to return by October 16 or be expelled. On the 13<sup>th</sup> their parents wrote the Board of Education and asked, unsuccessfully, for a meeting. They demanded their children's return without "undue pressure," ending with a statement from the students declaring solidarity with Travis and Lewis: "...[W]e will suffer whatever punishment they have to take with them. In school we are taught democracy, but the rights that democracy has to offer have been denied to us...However, we are children of God, who makes the sun shine on the just and unjust. So we petition all our fellowmen to love rather than hate, to build rather than tear down, to bind our nation with love and justice without regard to race, color or creed." Every day they marched to school and left after refusing to sign the slips, even as the black community at large, fearing violence, withdrew its support. On October 16, 103 students marched out permanently. *The New York Times* reported they thereby brought McComb "to the brink of a serious racial crisis." Some white residents, it noted, "conceded reluctantly that a basic change has taken place in the Negroes' attitudes, but none profess to know why."<sup>81</sup>

<sup>78</sup> Charles McDew, interview by Katherine Shannon, August 24, 1967, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University; Lynd, "Mississippi: 1961-1962," 14; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August July 30, 1984, Taylor Branch Papers; News Release, May 21, 1962 #0007-0008, Reel 13, Series VII, Communications Department, Public Relations, SNCC Papers.

<sup>79</sup> Charles McDew, interview by Katherine Shannon, August 24, 1967, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 514, 518-519; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 234-235.

<sup>80</sup> "Workman Claims Newsmen Cursed," "Man Brags 'We Stole the Film,'" and "McComb Victims Ask Aid," *The State Times*, October 12 and 13, 1961; "Pray, Walk, Fight," *Newsweek*, October 23, 1961; "2 Beaten in Mississippi," *New York Times*, October 12, 1961.

<sup>81</sup> "McComb, Mississippi," fact sheet, File #0891, Reel 22, Series VIII, Research Department, SNCC Papers; Parents Burgland students to Board of Education, letter, October 13, 1961, and statement Burgland Students, William Heath



Upon their return from Atlanta the SNCC-workers, feeling responsible, developed a “make-shift school” at the Masonic Temple as a substitute. Called “Nonviolent High,” it was an experimental predecessor to SNCC’s 1964 ‘Freedom Schools,’ parallel educational institutions that tried to fill the gaps in southern black education. Fifty to seventy-five students attended it with Moses teaching math, McDew history, and Dion Diamond the sciences. Also included were geometry, English, French, and singing. The SNCC-workers, higher educated than the students’ own teachers, discovered that their way of teaching also increased the students’ confidence. A good idea “was accepted regardless of what your social status was,” one teenager recalled, which stimulated those “who had never been held in high regard in their communities.” On October 21, *The State Times* reported, the fire department (falsely) ruled the Temple a ‘fire hazard,’ and ordered them out. The school moved to a neighboring church. Considering “the circumstances [and] extreme emotional tensions in the town,” Moses concluded, “we did pretty well.” A Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission investigator indignantly documented that “Moses began to teach...just as though it was an improved institution of education.”<sup>82</sup>

Nonetheless SNCC’s newsletter *The Liberator* noted that “it was recognized from the beginning that SNCC could not provide an adequate school program.” After all, it emerged out of necessity, not conscious design. From October 13 onwards SNCC therefore negotiated with black Campbell College in Jackson to admit the students at their high school department. By October’s end—when Nonviolent High closed because its faculty faced trial—67 had enrolled there. SNCC made several fundraising appeals to secure \$30,000 in “scholarship assistance.” On October 22, the newsletter stated, fifty-eight of them and four SNCC-workers including Moses tried to visit Brenda Travis in Oakley, but the sheriff and “twenty-five deputies with shot guns, pistols, tear gas rifles, night sticks and dogs” denied them admission.<sup>83</sup>

The trial on October 31 was swift and severe. Despite conflicting police testimonies, four local students received six month imprisonment and \$500 fines each. Eleven others, including Moses, McDew, and Zellner, were sentenced to four months and \$200 fines each. Judge Brumfield, who later admitted he would have convicted them no matter what, singled out Moses and local blacks’ perceived inability “to think for themselves” in a statement that was widely circulated in SNCC: “[U]ntil this past August, we have gotten along very well. It was then that this outsider Bob Moses came...Those of you who are local residents are like sheep being led to the slaughter. If you continue to follow the advice of outside agitators you will be like sheep and be slaughtered.” He asked: “Robert, haven’t some of the people from your school been able to...register without violence here?” Moses later wrote he then thought to himself: “Southerners are exposed the most when they boast.” Appeal bonds were \$1,000 each. Zellner’s father, a converted Klan-member, bonded him out. According to *The Southern Patriot* Moses refused bond “until the local students could be bailed out too.” Requiring \$14,000 in total, several Northern colleges organized fundraising campaigns, but \$14,000 was more than SNCC could spare. In fact, Charles Payne observed, the amount comprised SNCC’s entire annual budget. The fourteen thus had to acquiesce to jail.<sup>84</sup>

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Papers; Lynd and Lynd, *Nonviolence in America*, 246; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 232; Claude Sitton, “Hard-Core Segregationist City In Mississippi Is Nearing Crisis,” *New York Times*, October 21, 1961.

<sup>82</sup> Lynd, “Mississippi: 1961-1962,” 14; Dittmer, *Local People*, 112-13; Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 125; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 521-22; Fleming, *Soon We Will Not Cry*, 91; “‘Non-Violent’ Building Condemned in McComb,” *Jackson State Times*, October 21, 1961; A.L. Hopkins, A.L., “Robert Moses, Colored Male,” investigative report, April 19, 1962, Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission Online, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, MS, [http://mdah.state.ms.us/arrec/digital\\_archives/sovcom/](http://mdah.state.ms.us/arrec/digital_archives/sovcom/) (accessed November 22, 2007). Ruby Doris Smith was another teacher at Nonviolent High.

<sup>83</sup> “Brenda Travis Denied Visitors,” *The Liberator* 1, no. 2 (November 17, 1961): 1, private collection Joan Mulholland; Charles McDew to Wyatt T. Walker, January 5 1962, File #0448, Reel 9, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers; Travis Britt, interview by James Mosby, September 24, 1968, transcript Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University; *Clarion Ledger* and *State Times*, October 15-17, 1961; The students went to Oakley in two cars and a bus, trailed by eight police cars. After the attempt to see Brenda Travis, the license of the black owner of the bus was revoked.

<sup>84</sup> “McComb Negroes Unable To Think For Themselves...Says Judge” and Robert Parris Moses, “Letter from Magnolia Jail,” *The Liberator* 1, no. 2 (November 17, 1961): 3-4, private collection Joan Mulholland; Dittmer, *Local People*, 111,

Confinement was not easy, Moses recorded in 1962: “Characteristic of the Mississippi jails is that you sit and rot.” Not allowed to work, there was “[n]othing to do inside. They give you your meals two or three times a day; they give you your shower one or two times a week; they give you silence or nasty words otherwise.” There were some moments of relief through playing chess, reading books, and writing letters home. Forman forwarded letters to Moses and wrote him that they were “urging people to write you.” In early November the FBI interviewed Moses and local blacks brought food daily, until the jailers limited their visits to once a week. These visits were meaningful, Moses later commented, because “the community people took a stand in that sense.” More than signs of support, they were of strategic importance, indicating the significance of grassroots networks: “[T]hey would smuggle in [and out] letters...and we had a little underground of information passing back and forth between us and the people in town.” In one smuggled letter dating November 1, Moses wrote:

I am writing this note from the drunk tank of the county jail in Magnolia, Mississippi. Twelve of us are here, sprawled out along the concrete bunker. Curtis Hayes, Hollis Watkins, Ike Lewis, and Robert Talbert, four veterans of the bunker, are sitting up talking—mostly about girls; McDew (“Tell the story”) is curled into the concrete and the wall; Harold Robinson, Stephen Ashley, James Wells, Lee Chester Vick, Leetus Eubanks, and Ivery Diggs [lie] cramped on the cold bunker; I’m sitting with smuggled pen and paper, thinking a little, writing a little; Myrtis Bennett and Janie Campbell are across the way wedded to a different icy cubicle.

Later on Hollis will lead out with a clear tenor into a freedom song, Talbert and Lewis will supply jokes and McDew will discourse on the history of the black man and the Jew. McDew, a black by birth, a Jew by choice, and a revolutionary by necessity, has taken the deep hates and deep loves of America, and the world, reserved for those who dare to stand in a strong sun and cast a sharp shadow.

In the words of Judge Brumfield, who sentenced us, we are ‘cold calculators’ who design to disrupt the racial harmony (harmonious since 1619) of McComb into racial strife and rioting. ... It’s mealtime now: we have rice and gravy in a flat pan, dry bread and a ‘big town cake’; we lack eating and drinking utensils. Water comes from a faucet and goes into a hole.

This is Mississippi, the middle of the iceberg. Hollis is leading off with his tenor, ‘Michael row the boat ashore, Alleluia; Christian brothers don’t be slow, Alleluia; Mississippi’s next to go, Alleluia.’ This is a tremor in the middle of the iceberg—from a stone that the builders rejected.<sup>85</sup>

McComb represented the birth of the Moses-legend steeped in religious language, starting with the “Christlike” interpretation of the Caston assault. Ernest Nobles likened him to “Moses in the Bible” and Hayes called him “my little Jesus.” Yet this letter suggests that Moses deliberately encouraged a religious aura around him and SNCC too. The last sentence referred to Psalm 118:22 (“The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone,” implying they were sanctioned by God) and Matthew 21:42 (in which Jesus called himself the stone)—famous Biblical passages everyone in the local and SNCC community recognized. Published in *The Liberator*, Moses’ letter became “well-known in the movement.” In later letters and speeches, when SNCC’s religious cadre had waned, however, he avoided

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113; Zellner, *The Wrong Side of Murder Creek*, 170; Cagin and Dray, *We Are Not Afraid*, 160; Phil Curry, Oberlin McComb Committee, to SNCC, letter November 10, 1961, File #0765, Reel 5, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, and “Students Face Mississippi Violence for You!!!” fundraising pamphlet, no date, File #0389, Reel 1, Series I, Chairman Files Charles McDew, SNCC Papers; Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 126.

<sup>85</sup> Lynd, “Mississippi: 1961-1962,” 14; James Forman to Bob Moses, letter, November 20, 1961, File #1148, Reel 69, Appendix A: MFDP Papers, and “Fact Report 1961-1962,” File #0500, Reel 8, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers; Robert Paris Moses to FBI from Pike County Jail, report, November 6, 1961, Box 106, Taylor Branch Papers; Moses interview Carson, 1982; Dittmer, *Local People*, 113; Robert Parris Moses, “Letter from Magnolia Jail,” *The Liberator* 1, no. 2 (November 17, 1961): 4, private collection Joan Mulholland.

such imagery<sup>86</sup>. Whether he used this imagery to reverberate with religious supporters to advance his cause or whether these were heartfelt reflections of his emotional state or interpretation of events, it did contribute to his “Jesus-like aura.” It was likely a win-win situation for Moses: the language was not too far removed from his own religious sensitivity even if he appreciated that it struck a chord with locals and the more religious workers in SNCC. In a way it illustrated his later beliefs in meeting people ‘where they are.’ Regardless of his intentions, it suggests that for now Moses willingly associated himself with Christianity if it helped.<sup>87</sup>

Moses’ inclusion of the other students’ names and activities is also revealing. Rather than overplaying his own suffering, he described a *collective* experience that reflected his budding leadership approach. Additionally noteworthy is Moses’ first usage of the phrase ‘tremor in the middle of the iceberg,’ which SNCC-workers now consciously repeated to justify their choice of Mississippi: deliberately going to the worst places in the South dramatized US racial conditions (coinciding with an overall renewed national interest in poverty) and if SNCC could “crack” these areas, it could “send unsettling reverberations” through the rest of the nation. Moses later explained that Mississippi “was the central place to promote the subjugation of Black people...If you can do it in Mississippi, you can do it anywhere.” Moreover, one SNCC-scholar argued, “[s]uch work required just the kind of stamina” only SNCC-workers possessed and “offered a reassuring moral simplicity: white men seemed really evil; therefore, black men could be really good.” This solidified SNCC’s recalcitrance against what Stokely Carmichael termed “the conventional wisdom of the older civil rights groups.” Particularly the national NAACP advocated that change occurred by starting with the easier places (like border-states and urban areas) and then working your way in. Even SCLC’s Andrew Young once stated: “We tried to warn SNCC...We knew better than to take on Mississippi.”<sup>88</sup>

As November progressed, the thirteen students (McDew again bailed out early) faced bleak prospects. After visiting them on the 13<sup>th</sup>, Jack Young documented his “very definite impression that all of them would like to be out.” Yet if bond was not received in time, they had to serve their full sentences. Furthermore, Young, who had worked extensively on the cases, reluctantly wrote SNCC that “my fee be paid” otherwise he had to “withdraw.” SNCC then gladly accepted the \$13,000 bond needed from SCEF and the thirteen were released on December 6<sup>th</sup>. Three SNCC-workers, including Diane Nash, and five

<sup>86</sup> At a 2003 religious conference, however, Moses spoke of Amzie Moore as “the King Solomon of the Delta.” (Bob Moses and Victoria Gray, “Civil Rights as Theological Drama” (Conference on Lived Theology and Civil Courage, 2003), transcript, [http://www.livedtheology.org/colt\\_03\\_gray\\_moses.html](http://www.livedtheology.org/colt_03_gray_moses.html) (accessed January 23, 2009)).

<sup>87</sup> Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 500; Carson, *In Struggle*, 78, 140; *Freedom On My Mind*, directed by Connie Field and Marilyn Mulford, Clarity Educational Productions, 1994; David Halberstam, *The Children* (New York: Random House, 1998), 403; Marsh, *God’s Long Summer*, 46; King, *Freedom Song*, 469; Forman, *The Making of Revolutionaries*, 233.

<sup>88</sup> Marsh, *God’s Long Summer*, 10; Hammerback and Jensen, “Calling Washington Collect,” in *Civil Rights Rhetoric and the American Presidency*, eds. Aune and Rigsby, 136; Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*, 228; Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 19-20, 258; Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 241; Vanessa Lynn Davis, *‘Sisters and Brothers All’: The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and the Struggle for Political Equality* (PhD dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 1996), 57n.

<sup>89</sup> This was not the end of the story. On May 21-22, 1962, Moses, McDew, and the Burgland students, represented by Jack Young, appealed their breach-of-peace convictions for the October march. Six white ministers and several SNCC-workers attended their trial for support. The *Enterprise Journal* reported that Young frankly posed the all-white jury whether Moses’ Northern background and race affected the trial’s outcome. He also asked to remove one who refused to answer if the defendants had a right to encourage voter registration, but Judge Simmons objected. SNCC wired Robert Kennedy to come “witness the travesty of justice.” During the trial, the Prosecuting Attorney asked Moses whether “trouble is your business.” He affirmed: “We do whatever is necessary...to see that Negroes get the rights they’re entitled to.” He later added a keen understanding of the stakes: “We are not in Mississippi fighting for civil rights as such, but for those civil liberties that provide an alternative to an armed struggle.” As Moses predicted in a May 15 letter, “we will all be found guilty.” In 1965 the Mississippi Supreme Court overturned his conviction despite “the contempt which many may have for Moses,” since he was not “guilty of violent, loud, offensive or boisterous conduct” but rather had behaved like “a hen mothering her brood.” (News Release, May 21, 1962, File #0008-0009, Reel 14, Series VII Communications Department, Public Relations, and Bob Moses to Mr. Benenson, letter, May 15, 1962, File

Burgland students who had returned from Jackson for the purpose, picked them up at the bus terminal, where all eight were served injunctions against using the bus station. Fearing violence, Charles McDew wired Robert Kennedy: “Urgently request federal marshals in McComb Mississippi to protect Bob Moses [and] McComb students.” This was not unrealistic: in November a mob beat six CORE-workers at the terminal for testing the ICC-ruling and a shotgun blast into a residence nearly killed John Hardy and Dion Diamond. On December 1 whites attacked three journalists and another group later beat three CORE-activists. Upon release Moses nonetheless proclaimed he “intended to stay in Mississippi to register more people to vote.”<sup>90</sup>

Yet with the students at Campbell and adults afraid to register, McComb no longer appeared viable. About twenty-five had registered in five months of nearly forty attempts, although Moses said in 1966 he considered any attempt “a huge breakthrough, because in the last ten years you hadn’t gotten twenty people who had attempted to register.” SNCC had also lost the NAACP’s support after the walk-outs, although it protested Travis’ sentence to the Justice Department and Medgar Evers spoke at a McComb rally and attended a Lee memorial service on October 29. Privately, Evers was disgruntled with SNCC, who not “until they began to run into difficulties securing bonds [asked] for NAACP assistance publicly and cooperatively.” In a letter he charged that Lee’s death and SNCC’s “rash actions” now stifled the NAACP: “So it is that we are not able to get Negroes in Amite County to do what they were otherwise trying to do for themselves, before the arrival of SNCC.” At an NAACP executive meeting C.C. Bryant asked Evers to take over the project, but other NAACP-affiliates, including Amzie Moore, E.W. Steptoe, and Webb Owens, defended SNCC. “That,” Moses reflected in 1983, “knocked the wind out of any real effort to isolate us. Because it would be difficult for Medgar with such a small operation that he had to go against the real feelings of his key people around the state.” Bryant nevertheless denied SNCC further use of the Masonic Temple.<sup>91</sup>

Despite being considered a failure by the press and most civil rights groups for its meager end results, Moses argued that McComb—rather than Jackson’s direct action demonstrations—was the true “kick-off point” for the Mississippi movement. To him McComb confirmed that his slow organizing approach was the only model for successful future campaigns if its lessons were applied. Its first lesson was that even though McComb had nullified the distinction between direct action and voter registration, the first was not viable in Mississippi on the long term: “I didn’t think it was a program...it was a one event thing, it was not something that the movement could sustain.” After all, direct action divided local blacks, alienated the NAACP, and SNCC lacked the money to counter excessive jail terms. Mississippi, Moses had

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#0378, Reel 5, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers; “Pike Court Opens 19 ‘Rider’ Appeal Trials,” “Ministers Visit Pike Courtroom,” and “Second Leader of SNCC Is on Trial in Magnolia,” *The McComb-Enterprise Journal*, May 21 and May 22, 1962; “SNCC Staffers Sentenced in Mississippi, Kennedy Asked to Witness Trials,” *The Student Voice*, June 1962; “Negro’s Sentence Overruled in McComb Demonstrations,” and “Court Throws Out Moses’ Conviction,” *The Clarion-Ledger*, October 12, 1965)

<sup>90</sup> Jack Young to SNCC, letter, November 14, 1961, File #0097, Reel 10, and SCEF to SNCC, letters, November-December 1961 and June 30, 1962, Files #0503, #0510, and #0593, Reel 9, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, and Newsletter SNCC, December 6, 1961, File #1070-1071, Reel 13, Series IV, Communications Department, Public Relations, and Charles McDew to Robert F. Kennedy, telegram, File #0418, Reel 1, Series I, Chairman Files Charles McDew, SNCC Papers; Woods, *Black Struggle, Red Scare*, 201-202; Dittmer, *Local People*, 114; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 559-560; Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*, 77.

<sup>91</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by Anne Romaine, September 1966/November 14, 1987, Anne Romaine Papers; Moses interview Carson, 1982; Handwritten notes Taylor Branch, January 16, 1999, Box 108, Folder 1, Taylor Branch Papers; Dittmer, *Local People*, 112; Dittmer, *Local People*, 112; Moses interview Dittmer, 1983; “NAACP Invites JFK, Brother to Visit State,” *State Times*, October 11, 1961; Medgar Evers to Roy Wilkins, Gloster B. Current, and Ruby Hurley, memorandum, October 12, 1961, and Medgar Evers to Alfred Baker Lewis, letter, February 1, 1962, in *The Autobiography of Medgar Evers*, eds. Evers-Williams and Manning, 235-239, 243-244; Medgar Evers, report, October 31, 1961, Reel 10, Group II, Box C-75, Part 27 Selected Branch Files, Microfilm, Records NAACP.

realized, was designed to promote and reinforce racism like “a South African enclave in the United States.” They could not depend on federal intervention or protection either: “We learned in McComb, that’s where we got our feet wet.” Voter registration in contrast, Moses claimed, was not only a viable program, but one “on which there was almost universal agreement.” Whether willing to register or not, everybody “believed that registration would help.”<sup>92</sup>

Moreover, the direct action proponents in Mississippi lacked the commitment to train activists accordingly. Their demonstrations, Moses argued in 1982, were “not part of any idea of building...a long-term movement around direct action and nonviolence, because no-one from that [wing of SNCC] had... stated that they were prepared to stay in McComb and build such a movement.” Consequently, many such activists, like Bevel, came and went in waves because they had not established family-like relations with the residents. This demonstrated the viability of Moses’ organizing approach emphasizing personal relationships and of locals’ necessity to learn to depend on themselves. While the project in Moses’ view “was simply an initial stage of exploration,” it proved that hypothesis: “My feeling, after the initial program in McComb...was that it was worthwhile, that you could do that. You could get local people to work with you.”<sup>93</sup>

McComb’s second lesson, Moses believed, was that “change in Mississippi depended” not only on program and unity, but “upon finding agents to produce that change.” While entrance might be provided by the middle class, this manpower had to come from all in the community’s social strata, particularly young people. The young were SNCC’s natural constituency considering its workers’ own age. Yet the choice to focus on them was also pragmatic, since most adults were tied down by jobs, families, or economic ties to whites, like businessmen, teachers, or ministers. This was especially true in rural areas. As one Mississippi NAACP-member complained to national headquarters: “Greenwood is not like Clarksdale or Jackson. We don’t have the support of ministers here, we have no-one to say, ‘I’ll donate the NAACP a \$100.00’ nor do we have anyone here to say, ‘I’ll work for free.’ We have just as much trouble with Negroes as we do whites.” “Therefore,” Moses said in 1962, “the only way...was to begin to build a group of young people who would not be responsible economically to any sector of the white community.”<sup>94</sup>

McComb’s third lesson accordingly was that SNCC’s strategy of fulltime field activists working on subsistence pay could combat the type of oppression that had strangled Mississippi’s earlier activists and expand movement participation beyond the black middle class. This again underscores the question of what constitutes a ‘movement,’ because, compared to Mississippi activism in the 1950s, merely organizational presence, or individual activism, cannot define it. Or, as one worker stated in 1965, a movement is not a movement if it always has to depend on a few people “to keep the wheels going.” “We [didn’t] know nothing about [the NAACP],” another, a working-class black, agreed in 1968, “I found out later that they had been in the state for 40 years, but we sure hadn’t seen ‘em.” Even in distributing direct aid the NAACP had not targeted the vast majority of rural poor. Although the NAACP’s and the RCNL’s ‘Operation Mississippi Airlift’ had accommodated several thousand Delta blacks in 1955-1956, overall aid

<sup>92</sup> Moses interview Dittmer, 1983; Robert Parris Moses and C.C. Bryant, “Comments,” at Mississippi Voices of the Civil Rights Movement Conference, McComb, Mississippi, July 9, 1983, transcript in author’s possession; *Freedom On My Mind*, directed by Connie Field and Marilyn Mulford, Clarity Educational Productions, 1994; Hammerback and Jensen, “Calling Washington Collect,” in *Civil Rights Rhetoric and the American Presidency*, eds. Aune and Rigsby, 136; Robert Parris Moses, interviews by Taylor Branch, July 30, 1984, and February 15, 1991, Box 108, Folder 1, Taylor Branch Papers; Carson, *In Struggle*, 54.

<sup>93</sup> Moses interview Carson, 1982; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Anne Romaine, September 1966/November 14, 1987, Anne Romaine Papers; John C. Hammerback and Richard J. Jensen, “‘Your Tools Are Really The People’: The Rhetoric of Robert Parris Moses,” *Communications Monograph* 65, No. 2 (June 1998): 134.

<sup>94</sup> Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 45-46, 55-56; Andrew L. Johnson to Gloster Current, letter, April 22, 1964, Group III, Box C-74, Part 27, Selected Branch Files, Microfilm, Records NAACP, Library of Congress; Lynd, Moses, “Mississippi: 1961-1962,” 14-15; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Anne Romaine, September 1966/November 14, 1987, Anne Romaine Papers.

was earmarked for NAACP-members penalized for their activism. Accordingly many of its beneficiaries were middle-class blacks, and since most were movement participants already, aid drives rarely functioned as a tool to enlist others.<sup>95</sup>

Instances of protest can thus always be found. However, as the direct aid example shows, the answer to what constitutes a ‘movement’ lies in the degree, intensity, and effectiveness of protest. Moses’ strategy, aided by the Freedom Rides, not only energized local youth in a way the NAACP could not, but also allowed for the inclusion of working-class, rural, and high school blacks. The NAACP had a tiny field staff that was hindered in its relationships with locals because it was often forced to calculate national NAACP assignments; Medgar Evers for instance regularly had to travel the state to recruit members and collect dues. Unlike them, SNCC could thus *generate* a local movement in McComb by drawing the “untapped sources of movement strength,” ready to participate, *into* the movement, because it had the time and numbers to show them, systematically, how to organize through education, workshops, meetings, and canvassing. This approach thus defines another turning point within the theoretical ‘long movement’ concept: whereas SNCC’s entrance in 1961 could only develop because it built on earlier activism, the decision to work with ‘ordinary’ citizens alongside the middle class emerged pragmatically as much as philosophically precisely *because* those earlier activists historically had been unable to create the beguiling sense of movement, both of progress and inclusion, that SNCC could. As Aaron Henry admitted: “[T]he arrival of Robert Moses...marked a high point in the Mississippi civil rights movement.”<sup>96</sup>

SNCC’s novel group structure also aided this. Solely the people in the field—a group of no more than twenty people—decided the project’s direction. Rather than asking permission from individuals, like Moses or Bevel, or seeking permission from headquarters, the group practiced small-scale participatory democracy. Moreover, its freewheeling approach and deference to local initiatives signified the acceptance of opposing views even if they were “ruinous.” This left James Forman to warn that SNCC’s approach of “just to do, to act” under the “broad consensus” of voter registration and direct action obscured the need for a structure and program of “proper political education” *alongside* “action geared to achieving community control.” Nonetheless, as Clayborne Carson has argued, the group’s small size and common exposure to Mississippi brutality created “a new sense of themselves as cohesive and unique.” Unlike the campus-based sit-in students, whose approach conformed to middle class interests, SNCC’s field staff now realized that the South needed “a full-scale social revolution” from the bottom-up. Its unscrupulous acceptance of SCEF’s help underscored its new militant attitude.<sup>97</sup>

McComb thus altered SNCC’s function from “an administrative umbrella organization for student groups to a field organization” of fulltime activists. This change was formalized at its third general conference between April 27-29, 1962, where it adopted a new structure consisting of the Coordinating Committee members, the chairman, the executive secretary, two advisors, and three at large student members. In practice, however, Stokely Carmichael remembered that “whoever happened to be around... simply sat in and spoke his or her piece.” While its official goal remained coordinating campus protests, Carson observed that it now mostly focused on supporting the efforts of the staff, who were generally ex-students and newcomers that were more politically radicalized than their predecessors. “[I]t wasn’t viewed

<sup>95</sup> MFDP orientation, recorded by KZSU Radio Station Stanford University, 1965, transcript, KZSU Project South Interview Collection, Microfiche 2479 (E), Library of Congress; Unita Blackwell, interview by Robert Wright, August 10, 1968, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University; Wilkins to Evers, letter, December 21, 1955, in *The Autobiography of Medgar Evers*, eds. Evers-Williams and Manning, 43-44; Beito and Beito, *Black Maverick*, 146.

<sup>96</sup> Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 55; Robert Parris Moses and C.C. Bryant, “Comments,” at Mississippi Voices of the Civil Rights Movement Conference, McComb, Mississippi, July 9, 1983, transcript in author’s possession; Henry and Curry, *Aaron Henry*, 11.

<sup>97</sup> Carson, *In Struggle*, 50-51, 54; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 236, 238; Vanessa Murphree, *The Selling of Civil Rights: The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Use of Public Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 30; Mary Aickin Rothschild, ‘Northern Volunteers and the Southern ‘Freedom Summers,’ 1964-1965: A Social History (PhD dissertation, University of Washington, 1974), 16.



as a betrayal,” Bond said in 1968, “but simply recognizing that the former constituency of SNCC—college students—just...weren’t engaged in student anti-segregation activity on their campuses anymore.”<sup>98</sup>

The McComb campaign accelerated SNCC’s professionalization too. Ironically, SNCC’s effectiveness as a durable organization hinged in this period mostly on one man, James Forman, who adopted some “non-democratic powers” comparable to “the war powers of Congress.” Without his dedication and administrative skills, SNCC, being over \$10,000 in debt, might not have survived. Realizing how “ill-prepared the office was to manage the constant flow of media inquiries” during the McComb events, he organized the formation of SNCC’s Communication Department headed fulltime by Julian Bond and aided by three white students: Dottie Miller, Mary King, and Casey Hayden<sup>99</sup>. As Forman summarized SNCC’s weakness to SCEF: “Chiefly we have had the problem of projecting a SNCC personality. Many thought our needs were met by various organizations.” He therefore transformed headquarters, purchased a printing press, and successfully pushed for Charles McDew’s replacement with John Lewis as chairman because of Lewis’ “powerful presence, public speaking skills, [and] strong religious background.” At his suggestion, SNCC opened offices in Chicago, Detroit, New York, Washington, and Philadelphia, and fostered northern supporters’ ‘Friends of SNCC’-groups (FOS). Consequently, by December 1962 SNCC had raised over \$50,000; in 1963 its income reached \$309,000.<sup>100</sup>

While Atlanta headquarters recognized the need to consciously influence the press, Moses and the other field workers assumed that the local movement itself was the main generator of sympathetic press coverage. True, Moses and others spoke regularly with reporters, but in a 2010 interview he insisted that reaching the nation at large was not yet a field concern: “It’s people looking in, not us trying to project out.” Nevertheless, the press and other commentators latched on to SNCC’s new revolutionary public image. Pamphlets like Tom Hayden’s *Revolution in Mississippi*, based on his McComb experiences and interviews with Moses, amplified the interpretation of the McComb project as SNCC’s new embodiment, even though its direct action wing had embraced Moses’ slow organizing only as another approach alongside theirs. Zellner noted that people called “from all over” and most “wanted to know about Bob.”<sup>101</sup>

The McComb coverage transformed Moses’ position in SNCC. His courage during harrowing conditions and the media’s interest in him reestablished his credentials with the SNCC-workers. An outsider no longer, Moses enjoyed a reputation inside SNCC that was second to none. Stokely Carmichael, for instance, recalled that “[w]hen I heard the details of [the Caston-beating] my respect for Bob increased...I knew that sooner or later I was going to stand alongside this brother in struggle. With each new report, it kept building.” Even SNCC-workers themselves began to view Moses as SNCC’s personification. As Carmichael put it: “[H]e was to us, watching from Howard...almost a symbol of the SNCC spirit...anyone who was doing the things we’d been hearing had to be not only a great leader, but...a sho-nuff *hero*.”<sup>102</sup>

Consequently, Moses grudgingly realized, “when I began to get some press...the reaction of the people I was working with, the staff in Mississippi began...to change how they related to me.” The staff

<sup>98</sup> Carson, *In Struggle*, 69-71; Julian Bond, interview by John Britton, January 22, 1968, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University; Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 301-302.

<sup>99</sup> Dottie Miller’s full name is Dorothy Miller, or Dorothy Zellner, as she later married Bob Zellner. Casey Hayden’s full name is Sandra Cason; she married SDS-leader Tom Hayden. Both divorced in later years. Mary King later married and divorced SNCC volunteer Dennis Sweeney. Some of her activities included distributing recorded tapes to radio stations and SNCC-activist biographies to the media and to SNCC’s “Adopt a Field Secretary” fundraising program. For more on her work in the Communications Department, see her autobiography *Freedom Song*.

<sup>100</sup> Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 271; Murphree, *The Selling of Civil Rights*, 30, 39, 43-45, 51; Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 96; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 65; Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 130.

<sup>101</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 15, 2010; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 519; Greenberg, ed., *Circle of Trust*, 48; Agger, *The Sixties at 40*, 184.

<sup>102</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by Anne Romaine, September 1966/November 14, 1987, Anne Romaine Papers; Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 241-242, 310.

began “to react to you based on what they read rather than what you had before. Which is you’re reacting to people based on your interactions.” He increasingly began to feel uneasy about the publicity he was generating. Throughout his life Moses rejected implications in press and history books that he somehow “started the movement” in McComb, “because I wasn’t from McComb. And as far as I know things don’t get started by somebody who is not from someplace just going in cold turkey and figure that they are going to start something.” Yet he realized that fulltime organizers, like himself, could play transformative roles in the lives of locals. Naturally “SNCC didn’t develop Amzie,” but teenagers like Hollis Watkins and Curtis Hayes developed as leaders through their connection with SNCC. As he acknowledged in 2010, “their interface with SNCC” proved crucial for the politicization of these youngsters: “[They] were coming in and out of Mississippi, [they] were traveling with SNCC-workers to other places, they’re going to conferences and meetings that SNCC was holding. So that was the matrix, the Petri dish so to speak, where their own sense of themselves [evolved].” The student march testifies to this electrifying symbiosis.<sup>103</sup>

Moses and the few remaining SNCC-workers ended the year doing “isolated things” like attending Keglar’s trial. Realizing that SNCC had reached an impasse in McComb, Moses, Hardy, Bevel, Nash, and several local students including Watkins and Hayes retreated to Amzie Moore in Cleveland and began devising a new plan for Mississippi. Feeling responsible, Moses wanted to follow the expelled Burgland students to Jackson, “trying to see that they got squared away.” After everything, he wrote, the “movement from the rural to the urban is irresistible.” But he refused to leave the area completely because locals still suffered the consequences for their activism. Seeing their withdrawal therefore merely as a “tactical relocation,” the workers quietly planned their next offensive while the world looked to SNCC in Albany, Georgia.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by Charles Payne, August 1993, in *Debating the Civil Rights Movement*, Lawson and Payne, 178-179; Robert Parris Moses and C.C. Bryant, “Comments,” at Mississippi Voices of the Civil Rights Movement Conference, McComb, Mississippi, July 9, 1983, transcript in author’s possession; Robert Parris Moses, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 15, 2010.

<sup>104</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by Anne Romaine, September 1966/November 14, 1987, Anne Romaine Papers; Dittmer, *Local People*, 114; Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 195; Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*, 79; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 69.

## 5. Quiet Determination

### 5.1. Replicating McComb

During 1962-1963 Moses translated his McComb experiences into a solid method of organizing, and in the formation of the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) he found an instrument to apply his approach across Mississippi. Fulltime volunteer groups moved in with locals for extended periods of time and implemented his technique of developing personal relationships with locals of all social backgrounds and helping them with whatever resources—skills, manpower, education—were lacking. Through a process of trial and error, they discovered, in Moses' words, "how you can move even if you are afraid." SNCC duplicated this in other states, realizing that an enlarged grassroots constituency was effective in the Deep South and that its volunteer basis distinguished it from the established civil rights organizations. This "set a pattern," *The Student Voice* claimed, "for other civil rights groups" in the scale and character of support that national groups bequeathed local ones. An analysis of this organizing approach in practice—what Ella Baker termed the day-to-day "spade work"—illuminates the interplay between fulltime activists and locals in producing social change. Yet SNCC-workers' duplication of his approach in Georgia and elsewhere notwithstanding, Mississippi could develop it most consistently, in large part due to Moses.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast to Moses' consistent commitment to voter registration as an overriding priority, most non-Mississippi SNCC-workers took up voter registration only after demonstrations in Jackson and in Albany, Georgia, proved the futility of direct action in the Deep South once again. For example, James Bevel and his wife-to-be Diane Nash tenaciously tried to revive the Jackson Nonviolent Movement, founded the previous summer with local black youth and students from nearby black colleges<sup>2</sup>. Moses himself moved to Jackson in early December. His main interest in Jackson, however, was to look after the expelled McComb students. But Bevel and Nash, he reflected in 1984, considered his method of organizing too slow. Bevel, a flamboyant 25-year-old Mississippi-born black trained as a minister and fond of making rabble-rousing speeches, did not have the type of personality that was suited for Moses' patient approach. He and Nash, a 24-year-old light-skinned Chicagoan, had been stalwarts of James Lawson's Nashville movement. They accordingly overlooked the results of the McComb demonstrations and instigated boycotts of Jackson buses and the State Fair.<sup>3</sup>

As Moses anticipated, the Jackson Movement had difficulty finding community support. Resentment among middle-class blacks grew with each direct action that netted few results because city officials refused to negotiate. "Jackson is not Nashville," Moses summarized the Bevels' error in 1993, "you don't have a Black, middle-class community which is going to support you and those that might are within the NAACP [but] the NAACP is not supporting [direct action]." Generational and ideological tensions between SNCC and existing organizations also exacerbated as both tried to influence local youth. Medgar Evers, who considered Jackson his home base, was caught in the middle: he appreciated any outside help

<sup>1</sup> Moses, "Questions Raised By Moses," April, 1965, in *Come Sit At the Welcome Table*, ed. Bond and Lewis, 722-724; "Freedom Summer Planned in Miss.," *The Student Voice*, Special Issue (Spring 1964): 1, 3, in *The Student Voice*, ed. Carson, 133, 135; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 237; Rothschild, *Northern Volunteers and the Southern 'Freedom Summers'*, 14.

<sup>2</sup> These included Luvaghn Brown and Tougaloo and Jackson State College students such as Dorie Ladner, Lawrence Guyot, and Douglas MacArthur Cotton.

<sup>3</sup> Cobb, *On the Road to Freedom*, 290; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 56-57; Untitled SNCC Document, Spring 1962, Box 3, Mary King Papers; Dittmer, *Local People*, 116-117, 123; Moses interview Dittmer, 1983; Lester McKinnie to James Forman, letter, April 6, 1962, File #0848, Reel 7, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers; Robert Parris Moses, interviews by Taylor Branch, July 30 1984, and March 13, 1988, Box 108, Folder 1, Taylor Branch Papers; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 559; Carson, *In Struggle*, 22.

the national NAACP refused, but saw his own work dissipate with conservative locals withdrawing from activism and NAACP-youth gravitating to SNCC. He also resented SNCC's 'brash' methods. CORE's Tom Gaither, who shared SNCC's Jackson office, likewise complained in a letter that "the whole SNCC operation seems too chaotically impulsive" and that "no effort has been made to get a real strong local movement."<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, Mississippi's effective response to nonviolence by imposing lengthy jail sentences quickly stopped all movement. "Few people," Moses analyzed in 1966, "were quite ready for that kind of long-term siege," especially if they had businesses or family to attend to. The 'jail-no-bail' tactic also had no concrete effects; one worker even compared it to "shouting in an empty forest." The Bevels were unable to counter this by successfully conveying the merits of nonviolence onto uneducated Mississippi blacks. To them Gandhi meant little, Moses charged in 1993: "They're into Jesus [and] carrying their guns. [What SNCC-workers were] talking about has got to somehow penetrate that and it never did." Just copying a technique was insufficient: "[W]hether [Lawson] could have done the same thing in Jackson has always been the question in my mind. You can't do that...on nonviolence as a technique. You [need] some kind of real commitment...to make the people real practical, and spiritual at once." But Lawson's group "lacked the spiritual discipline to sustain themselves" under Mississippi's "onslaught." He blamed Lawson for returning to college: "I often thought about that, because...he didn't for some reason think that his job was to actually come *with* the students in the field." The Jackson Movement's failure thereby reinforced Moses' commitment to moral leadership by example.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile in Albany, Georgia, SNCC had more success with direct action, but the short-term results were equally paltry. Although the Albany movement started out as a rural voter registration project along Moses' McComb example, it developed into something else in part due to the characters of its instigators, Charles Sherrod, a 24-year-old black Virginian minister and sit-in leader, and Cordell Reagon, a 18-year-old black Freedom Rider from Nashville. After their release from prison in McComb half-way October 1961, they intended to work in Georgia's dangerous southwest rural counties like Terrell and Baker, but found the time-consuming work Moses had done in such remote areas too demanding. They therefore relocated to Albany, a city of 60,000 people that was 40 percent black and relatively progressive for Georgia's standards. As Sherrod explained in 2010: "It was no trouble at all getting...a place to eat, a place to just lay down my head, transportation...And I'm going to leave that to go to Terrell?"<sup>6</sup>

Sherrod and Reagon established personal relations with locals by hanging out at black high schools and social clubs. However, they postponed their voter registration plans when the newly-formed Albany Movement—a coalition including SNCC, the NAACP, the black ministerial alliance, and black women's clubs—began a massive direct action campaign to integrate public facilities. When month-long sit-ins and marches led to the arrest of hundreds (including incoming SNCC-workers), the Albany Movement invited Martin Luther King to make a speech. King's presence pressured city officials and energized locals. As SNCC-worker Bill Hansen put it at the time: "[King] can cause more hell to be raised by being in jail one night than anyone else could if they bombed city hall." When King resolved to stay in jail after a march that incarcerated another 250 protesters, negotiations with city officials intensified. However, after he and other leaders posted bond, city officials reneged on a vague, unwritten agreement that had been negotiated in their absence. The Albany Movement resumed direct action, but the City

<sup>4</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 117-118; Tom Gaither, letter, December 10, 1961, Box 15, Congress of Racial Equality Records (hereafter cited as CORE Records), Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin; Rothschild, *Northern Volunteers and the Southern 'Freedom Summers'*, 10.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by Anne Romaine, September 1966/November 14, 1987, Anne Romaine Papers; MFD orientation, recorded by KZSU Radio Station Stanford University, 1965, transcript, KZSU Project South Interview Collection, Microfiche 2479 (E), Library of Congress; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Charles Payne, August 1993, in *Debating the Civil Rights Movement*, Lawson and Payne, 180-181; Charles Sherrod, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 16, 2010; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, July 30, 1984; Moses interview Carson, 1982.

<sup>6</sup> Carson, *In Struggle*, 56-65; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 524-561; Charles Sherrod, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 16, 2010.

remained intransigent. Compared to McComb, the Albany Movement gained more adult support and generated a broad-based vehicle for activism in black community. SNCC's Martha Norman therefore called Albany a victory, not a failure: "They were the first Black Belt community to launch a citywide protest in the sixties. They were the model."<sup>7</sup>

Albany proved another turning point for SNCC. Most notably, it intensified its rivalry with SCLC. It resented King's sudden departure and accused SCLC of "taking over" the coalition. This strengthened SNCC's convictions of avoiding shared working areas and that relying on celebrity power stifled locals' growth even if it initially intensified it. Albany also strengthened the reluctance of the NAACP's national officials to work with SNCC. They complained that SNCC's Charles "Jones just about controls" the Albany Movement's Executive Committee. Jones, for his part, grumbled that the NAACP's Georgia field secretary "insists on working alone." In July and August 1962 interorganizational conflicts intensified when King's return to Albany to face trial for his march renewed nonviolent protests. SNCC-workers watched in frustration as locals deferentially followed King's lead. Unable to gain concessions, the Albany Movement returned to voter registration, leaving some in SNCC convinced that nonviolent moral suasion had outrun its course.<sup>8</sup>

Moses refused to let the Albany protests distract him. He did not heed calls to flood Albany with SNCC-workers, although he regularly had contact with the Georgia workers at Atlanta SNCC meetings<sup>9</sup>. Such rashness did not suit his personality and interfered with his single-minded Mississippi goals. He said in 2011 he still considered his "primary relationship with Amzie" and described himself as just being "my mother's son, quietly self-circumscribed now in the space SNCC carved out in Mississippi." SNCC-workers did not hold this against him, which demonstrates the strengths of SNCC's organizational culture celebrating diversity.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, to Moses the Albany demonstrations confirmed his analysis of the events in McComb and Jackson: programmatic and organizational unity were vital for the fledgling Deep South movement. Programmatic unity had to come through voter registration. Whereas the federal government could do little in direct action cases, he reasoned, the 1957 Civil Rights Act had authorized it to investigate and prosecute racial discrimination in voting. This provided a theoretical "space to crawl in...so they can't just arrest you" without risking federal involvement. Most SNCC-workers now agreed. As Marion Barry explained in 1965: "[W]e looked at how much you put into a situation and what you get out of it. [A] lot of energy, and money, and head-beatings...just wasn't worth it, compared to...the long run [gains] of a political thing." An extra incentive was a low-key New York voter registration fundraiser that Harry Belafonte organized, where Moses, Bob Zellner, Tim Jenkins, Charles McDew, Charles Jones, and Charles Sherrod commented on their work.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.; SNCC News Release, December 1961, Box 1, Folder 3, Howard Zinn Papers; Charles Sherrod, interview by Blackside, Inc., December 20, 1985, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries; Bill Hansen to SNCC, Field Report July 1962 (private collection Adam Fairclough); Greenberg ed., *A Circle of Trust*, 186.

<sup>8</sup> Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 173-219; Nostrum, "Between Memory and History," 354; Ruby Hurley, Vernon Jordan and Gloster Current, telephone conversation, December 18, 1961, Albany City Archives, and SNCC Staff Meeting, minutes, June 3, 1962, and Bill Hansen to SNCC, Field Report July 23, 1962 (private collection Adam Fairclough).

<sup>9</sup> In 2010 Sherrod said they frequently often "talked individually, one on one, me and Bob...there was always cross-currents of thoughts." The Albany SNCC-office's front door even featured a poster of Moses. (Charles Sherrod, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 16, 2010; Faith S. Holsaert, "Resistance U," in *Hands on the Freedom Plow*, Holsaert et al., 185)

<sup>10</sup> Charles Sherrod, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 16, 2010; Robert Parris Moses, email interview by author, March 10, 2011; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, March 13, 1988, Taylor Branch Papers.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by Anne Romaine, September 1966/November 14, 1987, Anne Romaine Papers; Marion Barry, interview by Howard Zinn, December 18, 1965, Box 3, Folder 10, Howard Zinn Papers; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, July 30, 1984, Taylor Branch Papers; Moses interview Carson, 1982.

The formation of the VEP (Voter Education Project) provided another boost for Moses' strategy. Directed by the Southern Regional Council (SRC) and funded by the Edgar Stern Family Fund and the Taconic and Field Foundations, the VEP furnished civil rights groups with money for voter registration drives. Between April 1962 and November 1964 the VEP helped register 688,000 blacks in eleven southern states. The VEP agreed to finance part of SNCC's operations, giving it \$24,000 in 1962-1963.<sup>12, 13</sup>

Although grateful for such help, the promotion of the VEP by officials from the Kennedy administration fuelled SNCC's estrangement from the federal government. SNCC's understanding was that the administration guaranteed a quid-pro-quo: if SNCC switched to voter registration, the government would protect them. Justice Department officials deny making any such pledges, but movement insiders, like SRC's Leslie Dunbar, maintain that they did. When the administration consistently failed to provide protection, SRC-director Harold Fleming described SNCC's disillusionment: "It was bruising and deeply emotional...people wept and cursed Robert Kennedy and Burke Marshall more than the FBI, whom they never had any confidence to begin with." This, historian Victor Navasky argued, "helps explain the bitter turn that the civil rights movement...ultimately took."<sup>14</sup>

To obtain the most benefit from VEP-money, Moses felt that organizational unity would be required. SNCC should therefore concentrate on the rural areas and create a vehicle that united all organizations in a common program. His prime motivation came from locals: "[P]eople felt threatened to the point where they really felt the need for [unity] to confront the opposition. [T]his is what I was responding to." Reducing internal competition was secondary; the projection of SNCC was never something he prioritized. After all, he explained in 1989, it "didn't make sense...to spend a lot of energy projecting SNCC in the local communities [since] you couldn't do the work if you were. [Because] the NAACP [would say], 'Well, I'm NAACP and I'm not going.'"<sup>15</sup>

On January 27, 1962, Moses summarized his plans in a report he wrote with Tom Gaither of CORE. It proposed a "concerted drive for voter registration" through a "state-wide coordinating council" composed of "individuals [who] represent functioning organizations" interested in this. Its targets would be the black majority Second, Third, and Fourth Congressional districts, the Gulf-Coast area, and cities like Laurel, Meridian, and Hattiesburg. Greenville, Clarksdale, Jackson, Vicksburg, and Natchez, where blacks often could vote, should receive "special consideration" since "apathy, ignorance, and long deprivation have dulled the appetite for the ballot." The plan echoed Moses' McComb approach: efforts should be "carefully spelled out in conjunction with the leaders of the city" and activists should "work toward the point where local leadership...will be able to sponsor and

<sup>12</sup> SNCC however received far less than other organizations (over \$500,000 was distributed) because it mainly worked in rural areas with little chance of success. This is particularly remarkable considering that the Deep South's 137 rural counties represented more voting strength than urban areas. As James Forman explained: "The rural areas...had a degree of power in the state capitals that was disproportionate to their populations. Under the so-called 'rotten boroughs' system of reapportionment, the rural vote in both the electoral college and the state legislature sometimes approached three times the value of the urban vote. It was thus possible, in principle, to take advantage of this by registering large numbers of rural blacks and thereby win an increase in black political influence." (Poletta, *Strategy and Identity in 1960's Black Protest*, 115).

<sup>13</sup> Pat Watters and Reese Clegghorn, *Climbing Jacob's Ladder: The Arrival of Negroes in Southern Politics* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967), 29, 44-50.

<sup>14</sup> Victor S. Navasky, *Kennedy Justice* (New York: Atheneum, 1977), 127-128; O'Reilly, *Racial Matters*, 66-67; Dittmer, *Local People*, 119-120; Carson, *In Struggle*, 70.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, March 13, 1988, Taylor Branch Papers; Moses interview Carson, 1982; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 55; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Charles Payne, August 1993, in *Debating the Civil Rights Movement*, Lawson and Payne, 175; Robert Parris Moses, interview by William Chafe, October 7, 1989, Allard Lowenstein Papers. Moses claimed that McComb's Webb Owens "really drove this [idea of unity] home to me," by stating "a thousand times": "I belong to the NAACP. I belong to CORE. I belong...to *anything* which is going to help this Black man in Mississippi." (Moses interview Dittmer, 1983)



develop the program.” This entailed living with locals so “a real relationship between all concerned may be realized.” It pleaded to recruit and train 35 Mississippi students before starting work in the summer.<sup>16</sup>

After conversations with Medgar Evers and Aaron Henry in Jackson, Moses and representatives of national and local civil rights organizations established the state-wide council named COFO<sup>17</sup> (Council of Federated Organizations) in early February. The COFO elected local NAACP-members Aaron Henry, Carsie Hall, and R.L.T. Smith as president, secretary, and treasurer. The presidency was to rotate, but no-one else volunteered, so Henry stayed on throughout its existence. Moses was elected program director and Louisiana student Dave Dennis, who had replaced Gaither as CORE’s representative, assistant program director. Lawrence Guyot and Tim Jenkins claimed some controversy erupted over Moses and Dennis being outsiders, but this remains unverified<sup>18</sup>. Rather than a coalition COFO was to function merely as a framework for cooperation. Programmatic decisions were made at state-wide conventions attended by all members, whose voices mattered equally. Staff, who implemented convention decisions, spread across Mississippi’s five congressional districts, which each had district branches. The separate organizations paid their own staff members, who worked under the COFO umbrella. Funds came from the VEP and the national organizations on a volunteer basis; COFO did “not solicit funds for itself” to minimize competition between supporting groups.<sup>19</sup>

Fear of competition was deep-seated among the national civil rights organizations. While SNCC needed VEP and COFO-money because a national audience preferred donating to more conservative and familiar organizations like the NAACP, the latter in turn feared that if money went to SNCC, it meant less for itself. According to James Forman, Roy Wilkins had opposed funding SNCC at all during the VEP-meetings, because he believed that working in the rural South was futile. Eventually only its state body endorsed COFO. Even Wyatt Walker, who described his dislike for SNCC as “adamant,” condemned the attitude of the national NAACP. “[T]he NAACP historically kept its branches from moving,” he stated in a 1967 interview, “The people were ready to act and the NAACP wouldn’t let them.” SCLC, however, kept out of Mississippi apart from establishing citizenship schools as part of the Citizenship Education Program, which it had inherited from the Highlander Folk School. According to Ella Baker, SCLC never “developed an organizing technique...they went in for mobilization.” COFO thus “provided [SCLC] with a vehicle...they otherwise wouldn’t have had.”<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> “Voter Registration—A Projected Program,” report by Tom Gaither and Bob Moses, January 27, 1962, Box 6, Ella Baker Papers; Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 129-130.

<sup>17</sup> Theoretically COFO already existed: it was founded in May 1961 as an ad hoc group of local blacks to negotiate the Freedom Riders’ release from Parchman with Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett. Barnett had refused to meet NAACP-officials, so Henry and Evers tricked him by going as ‘COFO.’ Despite this continuity, however, Moses confessed in 1966 he had neither known “about COFO or the meeting.” (Robert Parris Moses, interview by Anne Romaine, September 1966/November 14, 1987, Anne Romaine Papers)

<sup>18</sup> In 2010, however, Dave Dennis claimed that titles were given based on organizational, not personal qualifications: “[It] wasn’t because people knew me or what I could do...I was just a skinny kid who represented CORE, so ‘put him in there.’” (Dave Dennis, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 17, 2010)

<sup>19</sup> Henry and Curry, *Aaron Henry*, 108-109, 115; Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 61; Dittmer, *Local People*, 118-119; Lawrence Guyot, interview by John Rachal, September 7, 1996, transcript, Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi Collection, University of Southern Mississippi; Tim Jenkins, interview by Howard Zinn, December 18, 1965, Box 3, Folder 10, Howard Zinn Papers; “Mississippi: Structure of the Movement, Present Operations, and Prospectus for this Summer,” report, no date, File #0048, Reel 6, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers; King, *Freedom Song*, 309.

<sup>20</sup> Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 266-269; Lewis and D’Orso, *Walking with the Wind*, 186-187; Wyatt T. Walker and Ella Baker, interviews by John Britton, October 11, 1967, and June 19, 1968, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University; Moses interview, 1983; Cagin and Dray, *We Are Not Afraid*, 180. For a detailed discussion of SNCC’s fundraising problems in relation to the other civil rights groups, see “Minutes of SNCC Regional Meeting,” March 24, 1962, Files #0801-0804, Reel 3, Series III, Staff Meetings, SNCC Papers.

This also applied to CORE, which, fearing anonymity, initially opposed joining COFO. CORE, formed in 1941, operated nationwide, and was committed to nonviolent direct action and interracialism. It had a national headquarters, a clear administrative structure, and a prominent leader in James Farmer. While it looked top-down, however, in reality its local branches were largely autonomous. This was deliberate; as founding member George Houser stated in 1945, CORE aimed to create “a federation of strong local groups” rather than a centralized organization. Its southern branches, mostly newly formed and black-dominated, resembled SNCC in form, function, and outlook. Its members generally shared SNCC’s age profile and sympathy for local people. CORE’s field workers enjoyed considerable freedom. Dave Dennis recalled in 2010 that although CORE had hired him to coordinate Freedom Rides, he had “had no intention of doing this...I went to Mississippi [and] immediately went into a meeting with Bob.” To ease national CORE, however, Dennis said, “Bob and I met to see how we could...keep them happy.” They compromised that SNCC concentrated on the First, Second, Third, and Fifth Congressional District, and CORE on the Fourth, where it already worked.<sup>21</sup>

The national organizations realized that COFO offered many benefits. Aaron Henry cherished “the advantage of working with the head personnel of four main groups to develop new ideas” and Moses noted that unity “spurred contributions [and] interest in Mississippi.” Moreover, he said in 1983, the established groups “[conferred] a kind of formal legitimacy on us.” Dennis agreed: “[Henry] made us respectable. We couldn’t have done it by ourselves; we had to be introduced to these communities.” Above all Moses liked that it was a *people’s* organization. Simultaneously problems about “who got credit for what were always with us,” he admitted. SNCC covered 80% of Mississippi’s districts and COFO’s budget, which effectively meant that COFO equaled SNCC. Yet between 1962-1963 conflicts were minimal due to its small scope.<sup>22</sup>

Scholar Mary Aickin Rothschild judged COFO “one of the [movement’s] most successful coalitions.” That it was founded “when the nationwide civil rights movement was splintering disastrously” was indicative of Mississippi’s oppressive climate. Similar alliances were not replicated elsewhere, which testifies to Mississippi’s exceptional position within the South and local blacks’ need for massive strength and new approaches to break it. Moreover, it reflected the personalities of its founders, whom Rothschild called “movement oriented” people who prioritized their Mississippi goals over organizational commitment. Henry, a World War II veteran and pharmacy owner, who although an NAACP officer was not a paid staff member, felt he could “work for who I want as I want to.” Dave Dennis felt likewise. “[I] never believed in CORE chapters,” he reflected in 2010, “[because then] you took away the ownership [from] the local people.” Even Medgar Evers, whose organizational commitments, the editors of his autobiography argued, forced him to carefully balance “covert cooperation and public distance” from other organizations, was someone Moses felt “you could work with.” Dennis and Evers even became close friends who regularly hung out together. SCLC’s citizenship teacher Annelle Ponder, who shared Baker’s views of the movement, exercised a similar outlook in COFO.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement, 1948-1968* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 8, 10, 18; Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 69-70; Dave Dennis, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 17, 2010.

<sup>22</sup> Moses interview Dittmer, 1983; Henry and Curry, *Aaron Henry*, 115; Cobb, *On the Road to Freedom*, 267; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Charles Payne, August 1993, in *Debating the Civil Rights Movement*, Lawson and Payne, 174; Dittmer, *Local People*, 119; Greenberg ed., *Circle of Trust*, 63; Aaron Henry, interview by Robert Wright, September 25, 1968, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University; Moses interview Carson, 1982.

<sup>23</sup> Rothschild, *Northern Volunteers and the Southern ‘Freedom Summers,’* 17; Dave Dennis, interview by Blackside, Inc., November 10, 1985, for *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries; Dave Dennis, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 17, 2010; Evers-Williams and Manning, ed., *The Autobiography of Medgar Evers*, 88-89. Moses later stated that if “Charles had been there,” Evers’ more conservative, top-down approach brother, he believed, “it would have been hopeless.” (Moses interview Carson, 1982)

Yet COFO reflected Moses' personality and approach to organizing most. In 1965 local white attorney Bill Higgs claimed that Moses "was instrumental" in its founding. Without him SNCC likely would not have sought cooperation; James Bevel, Diane Nash, and their roommate in Jackson, SNCC-worker Bernard Lafayette, focused on the short term. Unlike Moses they did not feel personally intertwined with the state's fate. His experiences in white schools, AFSC-camps, McComb, and with Ella Baker and Amzie Moore primed him to search for like-minded people. COFO was a quintessential expression of his personal world view and past work, Charles Jones noted: "He had drawn together all of his efforts in Mississippi into that organization." Moses' first meeting with Dave Dennis in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in the fall of 1961 underscores this, the latter related in 2010: "The first time I met him I thought he was crazy...he was very quiet, [sitting] in a corner when other people talked...so I'm like 'what's this guy all about?' [because] I was looking at short gains, not the long term." Intrigued, he approached him. After that "we turned [our Baton Rouge] project around to voter registration." In January he and Moses reconnected; by February Dennis had joined COFO.<sup>24</sup>

On February 18 COFO-representatives met in Jackson to formulate a program for VEP Director Wiley Branton. Moses, anticipating the overrepresentation of the urban middle class, wrote Amzie Moore "to bring a strong group...The more of the rural people come, the better chance we have of adopting the type of program you folks need." This highlights Moses' still unwavering commitment to Moore and the poor rural black populace. At the meeting, reports show, urban middle class leaders were indeed prominent. The NAACP's Dr. A. B. Britton for instance asked "money to complete our efforts" in Jackson so it could be "used as a model" for the rest of Mississippi. However, SNCC recommended that COFO "include representatives from all walks of life" and "make its appeals to all people." It reiterated its commitment to working in the rural counties, but also accepted the need to involve the middle class "for we have no leaders to spare!" COFO agreed to develop a staff of mostly native youngsters "with local NAACP leaders and SCLC citizenship teachers [to give] Mississippi Negroes the broadest possible support."<sup>25</sup>

Recruitment occurred quietly over the next months, although sometimes direct appeals were applied. Willie Peacock, a black Rust College graduate, was leaving for Detroit when Moses and Amzie Moore, who knew his father from the RCNL, came to his house and stated "we're here to come and get him." Others joined after a meeting Moore held in Jackson. But most recruitment occurred as a side-effect of other projects. Some Jackson students automatically joined COFO, whose headquarters were located in the city. This, combined with Moses' plea to leave Jackson, frustrated some in its Nonviolent Movement, which needed the manpower for direct action. Especially local SNCC-worker Lawrence Guyot, Moses recalled, "originally thought of voter registration as a cop-out" and with his strong personality "was something to watch!" But Moses recounted "no dramatics" between himself and James Bevel because "our paths didn't cross much." Because of their scant progress with direct action in Jackson, Bevel had become more open to Moses' viewpoints too. The two men agreed on a political experiment: they would encourage blacks to run for office in the June Congressional elections. Bevel moved to the Delta city of Greenwood to work on Rev.

<sup>24</sup> Bill Higgs, interview by Howard Zinn, December 19, 1965, Box 3, Folder 10, Howard Zinn Papers; Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 199-200; Dave Dennis, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 17, 2010; Dave Dennis, interview by Blackside, Inc., November 10, 1985, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries.

<sup>25</sup> Bob Moses to Amzie Moore, letter, February 7, 1962, Box 1, Folder 2, Amzie Moore Papers; Carsie Hall to COFO, letter, February 5, 1962, and "First Draft of Report to Council of Federated Organizations," report, no date, and "Report to Council of Federated Organizations," February 18, 1962, and "Mississippi: Structure of the Movement, Present Operations, and Prospectus for this summer," report, no date, Files #0016A, #0033-0034A, #0017-18, and #0048, Reel 6, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers.

Theodore Trammell's campaign<sup>26</sup> with Henry and Moore, and Moses worked with R.L.T. Smith's campaign<sup>27, 28</sup>

Everyone knew that the black candidates had no chance of winning. "When I first announced my candidacy," Smith reflected in 1965, "everybody took it...as a great big joke," whereas in other southern states some blacks at least penetrated the political spectrum. Even blacks resisted, Marion Barry related the same year: "[T]hey didn't understand the value or the stimulation of [Negroes running]" if it had no results. But winning was never the campaigns' intent. Rather they were "an organizing tool," Moses explained, to encourage blacks to believe "that eventually they would be electing [black] people to office." It meant to show whites too, Smith stated, "that there was much room for improvement, particularly in the caliber of men who would represent us." The attempt therefore constituted a significant break from previous activism and aligned with Moses' analysis of Mississippi race relations. Smith noted that Moses "thought like I think—I felt that [ours] was an unusual[ly] difficult problem, and the ordinary means that [were] available to us...would not solve it." Barry agreed: "[T]he concept wasn't new...in terms of Negroes running to get a seat[,] but in Mississippi this was a radical and certainly militant position to take [and] new in the sense that [it might be called] stimulation politics."<sup>29</sup>

Moses worked as a 'submerged' campaign and road manager. He wrote Smith that he wanted to work "as quietly as possible." This suited his personality and desire to promote local leadership, but also conveniently prevented renewed 'outside agitation' charges. The campaign had a small interracial volunteer staff and one paid employee, Caroline Tyler. Smith valued Moses as "a deep thinker" of "considerable ability;" Moses marveled at Smith's "very formal" interface with others, "like he stepped out of a book." Moses drove him to campaign rallies in black churches, general stores, and black colleges in the fourteen counties of the Third Congressional district, which included the substantial towns of Port Gibson, Fayette, Natchez, and McComb. Moses gladly used the opportunity to "check on various people" in Amite and McComb, hoping it softened SNCC's departure. When Smith worked at his Jackson supermarket, Moses helped Tyler with her typing, distributed campaign literature, sought poll workers, arranged speaking engagements, and conducted workshops. White lawyer Bill Higgs said in 1965 that he briefed Moses on all developments and "brought him the speeches and the legal [and] political stuff." He claimed that Moses did "everything he could...to help Smith." Ella Baker reported that he "has been working six and seven days every week, sometimes holding classes out of town." He held two such workshops in Claiborne County, but when fifty whites verbally abused the participants on their departure from the first meeting only three blacks attended the second. In Jackson, Moses and Smith were arrested while trying to desegregate the state legislature's spectators' gallery as part of SNCC's coordinated attack on segregation in state legislatures in Mississippi and Georgia. Smith had his house shot at and his supermarket's windows

<sup>26</sup> When Trammell died of a heart attack, Bevel worked on the campaign of his replacement, Rev. Merrill Lindsay.

<sup>27</sup> According to Bill Higgs, the congressional campaign for Rev. Smith was conceived at night-long meetings in the Jackson Freedom House and at Medgar Evers' house, which included them and Smith's son, Bob. Initially it was suggested that Evers should run, but he declined two days later. Unlike Smith, he was a nationally known NAACP-member and the NAACP took the position it should not be directly involved in anything political. They then asked Bob, who also declined but proposed his father instead. Smith announced his campaign in mid-December. (Bill Higgs, interview by Howard Zinn, December 19, 1965, Box 3, Folder 10, Howard Zinn Papers; "Negro to Run in Primary for Congress," *The Clarion-Ledger*, December 17, 1961)

<sup>28</sup> Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 152; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, March 13, 1988, Taylor Branch Papers; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 67; Moses interview Carson, 1982; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 560; Cagin and Dray, *We Are Not Afraid*, 174, 180; Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 55; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 57, 66. Moses recalled the recruitment of Willie Peacock as follows: "'We need you,' I told Willie as he, Amzie, and I sat and talked in his Charleston, Mississippi home. On the spot, he agreed to come with us. Willie walked into a bedroom and told his mother he was leaving. Willie's father smiled approvingly."

<sup>29</sup> R.L.T. Smith and Marion Barry, interviews by Howard Zinn, December 30, 1965, and December 18, 1965, Box 3, Folder 10, Howard Zinn Papers; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 71; R.L.T. Smith, interview by Robert Wright, July 10, 1969, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University.

broken. Local media outlets cancelled his appearances on radio and TV, although complaints to the Federal Communications Committee (FCC) forced the broadcasters to backtrack.<sup>30</sup>

Moses discovered that politics offered new organizing possibilities: “You could get on TV” and project “a local person [rather than] the organizers for a civil rights organization. [O]ther local people who knew him would feel...they could come out to support him, whereas they [might] be reluctant to support SNCC.” From this experience, he recollected in 1966, “I first began to think through what was a political party, how does a political party get formed, what is the structure, what’s the base, all those questions which had never really been real questions for me.” In a letter to Smith he proposed “training people to run for office next year the first chance we get.” This indicates Moses’ long-term commitment to Mississippi and the depth of his thinking compared to most SNCC-workers. Apart from Bevel no outside SNCC-workers participated in the campaigns, but it was done “with the full awareness” of headquarters. Moses’ freedom to execute his ideas again exhibits the effectiveness of individual flexibility within SNCC, but also the precariousness of SNCC’s overall state. Even after McComb, it was “an ongoing discussion” what sort of organization it wanted to be. Therefore, James Forman argued, “[r]ather than set up rigid definitions of goals and tactics, it seemed best then to experiment and learn...and draw conclusions from this process.” Despite the candidates’ expected defeat, Moses’ experiment with the political then gradually began to determine the Mississippi movement’s strategic direction.<sup>31</sup>

## 5.2. Bouncing A Ball

In June 1962 SNCC received a \$5,000 VEP-grant to start six COFO-projects on July 1. Moses was eager to start: “[I]t is our goal to have several thousand Negroes apply for registration during the summer.” He outlined a new long-term political vision: “Negroes must be trained to evaluate prospective candidates and to participate themselves in the political process,” starting with the November 1963 local elections. He envisaged week-long adult education programs at the Mt. Beulah Institute in Edwards, Mississippi: SNCC “will recruit 30 a week to send there, so they can return to their community and train others.” The projects looked promising, Moses assured national SNCC at a June meeting: “In each place the work is...carried out in corporation with the local civic and civil rights groups” and “local group friction [is] smoothed out.” To promote cooperation, he even invited Wiley Branton to “talk to the various groups” and advised SNCC-workers to “bend over backwards to help the NAACP.”<sup>32</sup>

Each project’s intent was “strictly voter registration, because of the nature of the [VEP],” Moses cited at the SNCC-meeting, “but [staff] will also be laying the groundwork for an eventual direct action group” of local youth as an outreach to SNCC’s direct action wing. He now lived at Amzie Moore’s house with Bernard Lafayette and James and Diane Bevel, who intermittently joined the revived protests in Albany. Bevel’s and Moses’ different personalities and views, Taylor Branch claimed, still “put awkward

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.; Bob Moses to Rev. Smith, letter, no date, File #0328, Reel Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 263; Robert Parris Moses, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 15, 2010; Moses interview John Dittmer, August 15, 1983; Cagin and Dray, *We Are Not Afraid*, 174; Bill Higgs, interview by Howard Zinn, December 19, 1965, Box 3, Folder 10, Howard Zinn Papers; “Recent Progress of the Jackson Nonviolent Movement,” report Ella Baker to SNCC, no date, Box 6, Ella Baker Papers; Sutherland-Martinez, *Letters from Mississippi*, viii; Crosby, *A Little Taste of Freedom*, 79; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 67-68.

<sup>31</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by Anne Romaine, September 1966/November 14, 1987, Anne Romaine Papers; James Forman, interview by Howard Zinn, November 12, 1965, Box 3, Folder 10, Howard Zinn Papers; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 238; Lynd, “Mississippi: 1961-1962”; Bob Moses to John Fisher, letter, May 12, 1962, File #0870, Reel 6, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers.

<sup>32</sup> Bob Moses to “Interested Friends and Foundations,” memo, no date, Papers James Forman, Library of Congress; SNCC Meeting, minutes, June 1-2, 1962, File #0812-0813, Reel 11, Series V, SNCC Conferences, and Bob Moses to Rev. Smith, letter, no date, File #0328, Reel 9, and Bob Moses to Workers in the Voter Education Project, memo, no date, File #1010, Reel 10, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers.

silences between them.” Yet Moses likely acquiesced since McComb showed that direct action could involve the youth’s parents and because the VEP’s restrictions otherwise diminished COFO’s already tiny work force.<sup>33</sup>

Twenty SNCC-workers worked fulltime on the projects. Only Moses and two others were non-Mississippians; most were students from Rusk, Tougaloo, and Jackson State College<sup>34</sup>. They spread across the Delta counties: Ruleville in Sunflower, Cleveland in Bolivar, Greenville in Washington, Clarksdale in Coahoma, and Greenwood in Leflore. Hollis Watkins and Curtis Hayes worked in Hattiesburg, where they lived with local NAACP-president Vernon Dahmer, a black sawmill owner. In April Moses and McDew convinced SNCC-worker William Miller to “do a pilot study” of it to “serve as a guide post” for the other projects. Black Georgia SNCC-worker Frank Smith started work in Holly Springs, and other SNCC-workers in Vicksburg.<sup>35</sup>

VEP-money made workers’ living conditions easier. “Up to then,” Moses recalled, they lived “catch as catch can day by day.” Yet it was still inadequate for basic expenses. Whereas other organizations spent much of their funds on salaries, SNCC paid its workers a weekly subsistence of \$10 (\$9.64 after taxes). “SNCC’s wage scale,” Clayborne Carson observed, “was an essential element in its uniqueness.” Wages, moreover, were often used for project expenses—like stamps or pencils—and workers often still had to depend on locals’ generosity, even when living in SNCC-rented ‘Freedom Houses.’ Conditions were sometimes dire. Sam Block, a 25-year-old black Mississippi student who singlehandedly ran the Greenwood project, slept in his car for several days because he had nowhere to stay. Often SNCC-workers worked for their board too. Sandy Leigh, who later stayed at Dahmer’s, recalled sawing logs during daylight and organizing meetings at night.<sup>36</sup>

SNCC viewed such chores as quintessential to its job. Working class blacks, historian Wesley Hogan noted, proved “more responsive to activists who tried to become part of the community.” As one SNCC-document emphasized, workers should “pick cotton[,] scrub floors, wash cans and windows, baby sit.” Like Moses, most SNCC-workers began to wear overalls to symbolize their identification with blue-collar blacks. Occasionally, Dave Dennis recalled in 2010, “we crossed the line with [them],” for instance by wearing overalls to church. This offended locals, he said, because “if they *had* a suit, they *would* wear it.”<sup>37</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.; Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 55; Dittmer, *Local People*, 124; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 634; Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 11.

<sup>34</sup> The twenty activists (with age, place of residence, and occupation) in 1962 were: 1. Moses, 27, 2. Samuel Block, 25, Cleveland, student at Mississippi Vocational College, 3. Willie Peacock, 25, Charleston, Miss., Rust College graduate, 4. Cleveland Barks, Greenwood, 5. Lawrence Guyot, Jackson, 6. Jesse Harris, 20, Jackson, 7. Curtis Hayes, 21, McComb, student at Tougaloo, 8. James Jones, 22, Jackson, 9. Landy McNair, Jackson, 10. Lafayette Surney, 19, Ruleville, 11. James Travis, 20, Jackson, student at Tougaloo, 12. David Vasser, Greenwood, 13. Hollis Watkins, 21, McComb, student at Tougaloo, 14. Diane Nash Bevel, 24, Chicago, 15. Frank Smith, 20, Atlanta, student at Rust College, 16. Charles McLaurin, 22, Jackson, 17. Charles Cobb, 20, Springfield, Mass., student at Howard University, 18. Emma Bell, 19, McComb, student at Campbell Jr. College, 19. John Ball, Greenwood, 20. James Bevel (the three non-natives thus were Moses, Bevel, and Cobb). James Forman composed the list, to which he noted: “The number of native Mississippians on this list is one of the most encouraging aspects of our work thus far in the state, for it shows that indigenous leadership can be developed in even the most difficult areas.” (“Field Work in Mississippi,” report, no date, File #0057, Reel 10, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers)

<sup>35</sup> Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 128-129; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 57; “Supp. Material from SNCC Exec. Meeting, Nov. 1963,” report, Box 2, Folder 21, Howard Zinn Papers; William Miller, “Hattiesburg Report,” April 3, 1962, File #0941, Reel 7, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers. The Hattiesburg project was started with \$50 from SNCC, but SCLC and CORE contributed financially as well.

<sup>36</sup> Hammerback and Jensen, “Calling Washington Collect,” in *Civil Rights Rhetoric and the American Presidency*, eds. Aune and Rigsby, 144; Carson, *In Struggle*, 71; Dittmer, *Local People*, 120; Sandy Leigh, interview by Anne Romaine, March 22, 1967, Anne Romaine Papers.

<sup>37</sup> Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 79; Untitled SNCC Document, Box 6, Ella Baker Papers; Carson, *In Struggle*, 81; Lewis and D’Orso, *Walking with the Wind*, 187, 267; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 365; Dave Dennis, interview with author, April 17, 2010.



The majority of the workers were local males, and all were black. This pattern emerged philosophically and pragmatically: SNCC wanted to recruit local workers, but in fact had no choice. Most outside workers, Moses said in 1999, simply “didn’t stick.” John Hardy and Reginald Robinson had left, comparing Deep South organizing to “deep sea diving with a lot of pressure.” Robinson started a project in South Carolina and Ruby Doris Smith joined headquarters. In mid-summer James Bevel left for Atlanta to become SCLC’s Director of Direct Action. According to Moses, he left because he was convinced that “we could not do voter registration in Mississippi.” Diane Nash joined him, and Bernard Lafayette started a project in Selma, Alabama.<sup>38</sup>

The native workers, however, did not fit Moses’ definition of ‘local leadership.’ As he explained in 2011: they “were ‘local’ but not ‘local leaders’ because they travelled from project to project.” By ‘grassroots leadership’ he solely meant people who “were publicly identified as [leaders] by the black community in which they lived.” In this definition, facilitating local leadership meant doing whatever necessary to bring locals, irrespective of class or gender, into such a position. Dorie Ladner reflected in 2009 that locals “were putting their lives on the line to even involve themselves. So you couldn’t say you want a certain type [of person] first.” Luvaghn Brown remembered it somewhat differently: “No-one can say what was subconsciously done. [Generally] when one talks of developing leadership there is a natural prejudice toward people who think and act as they do.”<sup>39</sup>

COFO-projects were initiated and sustained independently of Moses’ presence. Each community project and congressional district had its own director; Moses’ role, SNCC-worker Ivanhoe Donaldson explained in 1967, was rather “coordinating and planning strategy.” Based in Cleveland or Greenville, Moses travelled from project to project. Sometimes portrayed as someone who avoided the pragmatic aspects of organizing, in reality Moses, in the words of Eric Burner, was “well aware [of] daily operations and management.” His behind-the-scenes work from June through September demonstrates the accuracy of this statement. It also illustrates how the process of ‘facilitation’ often depended upon Moses’ characteristics and contacts beyond the state.<sup>40</sup>

As an intellectual and his parents’ son, education characterized Moses’ organizing approach. In March he and Jim Dombrowski of SCEF planned a literacy project, enlisting the help of Frank Laubach, the nation’s leading literacy expert. Their purpose was to prepare “illiterate adult Negroes for citizenship.” SCLC voter registration director Jack O’Dell, whom Moses knew from Harlem, offered to send Mississippi workers to SCLC’s citizenship school in Dorchester, Georgia. Later in 1962, Moses wrote Guido Goldman, a Harvard student he had befriended at the Belafonte fundraiser, that he had sent feelers “to people interested in providing scholarships to Mississippi Negroes to study law” so blacks might “have weight in the 1968 elections.” He also helped organize local citizenship “workshops” as part of the Adult Education Program. At these locals discussed state government structures and legal cases, searched newspapers “for discussion cases,” outlined race and income statistics of the participants’ home counties, and learned how to run tape recorders.<sup>41</sup>

In May Moses arranged similar workshops at Tougaloo College for the COFO-workers that also included ‘cosmopolitan’ issues like “civil liberties, nonviolence, and folk songs.” He contacted Myles

<sup>38</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, 16 January, 1999, Taylor Branch Papers; Robert Parris Moses, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 15, 2010.

<sup>39</sup> Dorie Ladner, interview by author, Washington DC, November 16, 2010; Luvaghn Brown, email interview by author, January 13, 2011.

<sup>40</sup> Ivanhoe Donaldson, interview by Anne Romaine, March 23, 1967, Anne Romaine Papers; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 518; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 90, 207.

<sup>41</sup> Jim Dombrowski to Frank Laubach, letter, March 12, 1962, Box 1, Folder 2, Amzie Moore Papers; Bob Moses to Guido Goldman, letter, October 22, 1962, File #0662, Reel 6, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers; Bob Moses to Members of the Governing Board of the Miss Adult Education Program, memo, 1962, Box 14, CORE Records; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 634.

Horton about holding additional workshops at Highlander from June 4-9. He wrote he was “particularly interested in enlarging the number of participants from Mississippi” to increase their personal growth. He considered this a quintessential part of organizing: “Part of what the movement did was just...exposing people to all different kinds of people who were coming in and out of Mississippi [and] by taking them out of Mississippi...Our job was identifying people who were good candidates to go to that training [so they feel] part of some larger movement.” He attended the Highlander workshops, where participants like Hollis Watkins, Curtis Hayes, and Sam Block studied registration laws, crafted programs for their working areas, and listened to organizing advice from veteran citizenship teachers like Esau Jenkins. In October Horton informed Moses of leads for financial help for new educational programs. By then the Adult Education Program was “scotched,” but, he wrote Horton, SNCC could “carry out educational programs in communities in which we are working.”<sup>42</sup>

Ironically Moses’ desire for exposure caused the Program’s halt. As part of it he helped organize and conduct a workshop series “on important issues of democracy,” such as the Bill of Rights and its guarantees for free speech and assembly, across Mississippi. In May he asked Anne Braden in Jackson if she would speak at one workshop, because, she documented, “Bob felt the theory of civil liberties was something very important the people should think about—especially in Mississippi.” After all, he wrote one Harvard professor, “we will not stand any chance...if we do not have the privilege of protest.” Being preoccupied, Anne later asked him in Atlanta if her husband could replace her. Carl then joined him between July 13-19.<sup>43</sup>

On August 31 a report Braden wrote on his trip was leaked to southern newspapers. *The Clarion-Ledger* alarmingly headlined: “Braden, Accused As Red, Reported Active In State”; *The Jackson Daily News* even spoke of a “secret Communist document.” Moses and Bill Higgs then called Braden, he wrote, “in a very disturbed frame of mind” because for two days papers printed names and places mentioned in the report, falsely describing “everybody that we contacted as part of that old Communist conspiracy.” This included David Lollis, director of Mt. Beulah, where some of the workshops for the Adult Education Program were held. Lollis was fired and Mt. Beulah withdrew from the Program. The Bradens, Anne wrote, were “torn to shreds by other people in the movement”; Higgs and Wiley Branton asked SCEF to withdraw from Southern activism altogether. Anne retorted in a 13-page letter that argued that “the social price of McCarthyism” had been that too “many people with creative contributions to make” were driven out of the movement.<sup>44</sup>

The incident left COFO without a citizenship school and Moses caught in the middle. His educational efforts had come to a halt, but he sympathized with the Bradens. Nevertheless he was upset that Carl Braden’s report and an article by him in *The Southern Patriot* had exaggerated Braden’s role in the workshops and thereby obscured local contributions. It is striking that Moses appeared to be more concerned with the media portrayal of locals than with being identified with alleged Communists—a fact that underscores the difference between southern indigenous leaders and northern blacks in regard to the

<sup>42</sup> Payne, *I’ve Got The Light Of Freedom*, 142-144; Bob Moses to Myles Horton, letter, May 15, 1962, Files #0928, and Horton to Moses, letter, no date, File #0931, Reel 6, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers; Bob Moses to Myles Horton, letter, August 13, 1962, October 10, 1962, and Horton to Moses, letter, no date, November 15, 1962, and Bob Moses to A.D. Beittel, letter, May 29, 1962, Box 21, Highlander Research and Education Records, Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin; A.D. Beittel to Bob Moses, letter, June 1, 1962, Papers of James Forman, Library of Congress; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Charles Payne, August 1993, in *Debating the Civil Rights Movement*, Lawson and Payne, 173-174.

<sup>43</sup> Anne Braden to Wiley Branton, letter, September 23, 1962, Files #0671-0677, Reel 5, and Moses to Prof. Roderick Firth, letter, May 10, 1962, File #0650, Reel 10, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers.

<sup>44</sup> “Braden, Accused As Red, Reported Active in State,” *Clarion-Ledger*, September 1, 1962; “Secret Communist Document Is Bared,” *Jackson Daily News*, August 31, 1962; Woods, *Black Struggle, Red Scare*, 157-159; Carl Braden to Jim Dombrowski and John M. Coe, letter, September 2, 1962, and Carl Braden to Bill Higgs and Bob Moses, letter, September 7, 1962, Box 55, Folder 13, Carl & Anne Braden Papers.

'Communist issue.' He even replied to Anne that her 13-page letter was "a beautiful job," and expressed regret "we all had to be so cruddy about it." He then joined SCEF's Operation Freedom program, which funded local activists who had subsequently lost their homes or jobs. One of the first people he proposed to receive help later became the national symbol of the Mississippi movement: sharecropper Fannie Lou Hamer.<sup>45</sup>

After the Braden-trip the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission increased its surveillance of Moses. Like many white Southerners, its investigators believed in what historian Jeff Woods termed "an extreme southern nationalism" that interpreted any "racial reform [as] a plot hatched by foreign radicals"<sup>46</sup>. Hence a consistent misinterpretation of the civil rights movement characterized MSSC reports. Having argued that Moses had probably been "planted" by Communists, investigator Tom Scarborough saw the Braden-incident as confirmation of Moses' subversive intentions. After all, Scarborough believed, Moses' New York home was "located two doors from the Communist Party newspaper." As such, native SNCC-workers like Sam Block could simply be no more than Moses' "leg man and stooge" so "Moses himself can remain unknown...until the time gets ripe for his presence." The MSSC also misunderstood inter-organizational dynamics: Moses was repeatedly named CORE director, and Martin Luther King "the head of [Moses'] organization."<sup>47</sup>

Because many of these reports were based on biased articles in Southern newspapers, Moses became increasingly concerned to generate favorable press reports<sup>48</sup>. He therefore befriended John Fisher of the liberal, New York-based *Harper's Magazine*. At a SNCC-meeting he confirmed that "arrangements have been made for publicity...to be done by *Harper's*." He also met a Whitney Foundation official in New York about a fellowship for a "Negro student" to "write magazine and newspaper articles about the work in the South." As he wrote to Fisher, "we desperately need someone who is close to the struggle to interpret what is taking place." In October he wrote to *Jet* to suggest that the black-owned magazine put a native Mississippi SNCC-worker on its cover. He added: "We hardly ever see any Southern beauty on the cover, anyway." Braden and Moses further considered "holding a [two-week] seminar on news media" to train participants in the "proper gathering [and presenting] of facts" for the news.<sup>49</sup>

Moses exploited his northern connections for publicity too, thereby functioning as a behind-the-scenes mediator between the local and the national. He used the New York publishing house of Lawrence Benenson, whose son had been a student of his at Horace Mann, for free (fundraising) prints and suggested that he published an article on Bob Zellner. Benenson in turn introduced Moses to Congressmen John

<sup>45</sup> Anne Braden to Bob Moses, letter, September 25, 1963, and Carl Braden to Bob Moses and Aaron Henry, letter, September 12, 1962, and Bob Moses to Carl Braden, letter, October 8, 1962, Box 55, Folder 13, Carl and Anne Braden Papers; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 140-141.

<sup>46</sup> According to Woods, this xenophobia "had deep roots in the region's past," exacerbated by the Civil War and Reconstruction. Denying black agency, its advocates similarly believed Communists to be the driving force behind black activism because of their support for the working class. (Woods, *Black Struggle, Red Scare*, 2-20)

<sup>47</sup> Woods, *Black Struggle, Red Scare*, 2-20, 95; Tom Scarborough, "Mt. Beulah or Southern Christian Institute, Edwards, Miss.," July 23, 1962, "Bolivar County—Aaron Henry and James Bevel," May 21, 22, & 23, 1962, "Leflore County—Samuel Block and Robert Moses," August 9-10, 1962, investigative reports, and Harry Scrivner to Commission Members, "Sunflower County," report, September 7, 1962, and Charles Jacobs to Senator Eastland, letter, September 8, 1962, Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission Online, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, [http://mdah.state.ms.us/arrec/digital\\_archives/sovcom/](http://mdah.state.ms.us/arrec/digital_archives/sovcom/) (accessed November 22, 2007).

<sup>48</sup> Despite feeling that the "nature of the work" required a "quieter atmosphere," Moses realized that publicity was essential but should be done on *their* terms to limit the type of depictions of himself and locals like Herbert Lee and Brenda Travis. *The Clarion-Ledger* for instance falsely labeled Travis a "twice pregnant Negro girl who did several 'strip-teasing' acts in the Pike County jail." (Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 10, 1983, Taylor Branch Paper; Charles B. Gordon, "McComb Girl Gets Buildup After Release to Professor," *Clarion-Ledger*, May 17, 1962)

<sup>49</sup> Moses to John Fisher, letter, May 12, 1962, File #0870, Reel 6, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, and SNCC Meeting, minutes, June 1-2, 1962, File #0812-0813, Reel 11, Series V, SNCC Conferences, and Moses to Larry Still, letter, October 3, 1962, File #0979, Reel 12, Series VII, Communications Department, Public Relations, SNCC Papers.

Lindsay (R) and Emmanuel Cellar (D) and went “to Washington with us to see them.” Lindsay then offered help “with lawyers’ fees and further contacts.” Moses regularly corresponded with former colleagues as well; in October he for instance advised one on organizing a “Belafonte/King night” at Harvard. In July he asked his old roommate Bob Cohen and his New World Singers to do fundraising concerts for the Jackson Movement. The significance of Moses’ Ivy League background was underscored in June when the Rabinowitz Foundation offered him a \$15,000 grant to write a book on the student movement “because he has the academic qualifications.” Moses, committed to his field work, declined but “strongly” suggested another well-educated black Northerner: James Forman.<sup>50</sup>

Moses also used television to bring the movement North. On August 10 he and Sam Block accompanied 25 registrants to the Greenwood courthouse before members of the national news media, including reporters from CBS, the AP, and UPI. He worked closely with CBS to produce the documentary *Mississippi and the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment*, which aired on prime time on September 26 to an audience of “millions.” It showed SNCC-workers, including himself, accompanying blacks to the Hattiesburg courthouse. Moses’ collaboration with CBS, SNCC-scholar Vanessa Murphree argued, ensured “that the message of overt discrimination [was] clearly stated,” and “SNCC’s organizing efforts...shown in the best possible light.” Moses cherished another benefit: it projected the courage and determination of *local* blacks. The documentary evoked a sympathetic response from many Northern viewers. As one New Yorker wrote Moses: “[A]s I watched that TV program and observed the planning and patience that characterized your organization, I could not help but feel that what was being done, striven for, already existed [realized in you].”<sup>51</sup>

Moses was engaged in behind-the-scenes fundraising as well, like writing appeals to interested groups and visiting potential donors. Most SNCC-workers did such fundraising “reluctantly” because it meant leaving their projects. But Moses was more alert to the advantages of trips North, especially when he could cultivate New York so he could visit his northern contacts and family. He also ventured North more readily if it helped Mississippi blacks. In December he for instance attended a New York Direct Action Training conference to plead for “experienced people” in nonviolence to come to Mississippi so “workers can see how these people operate.” In hindsight he felt the reluctance among field staff around fundraising was an understandable mistake: “[None] of us [had] a background where people were thinking in terms of...how you put an economic base to an institution.” Consequently “we were not imaginative about fundraising” and “left the worries about fundraising to [James Forman].” Apart from selling SNCC-literature, he reflected in 1982, SNCC could have published monthly stories “around a given SNCC field secretary [and] the community that person worked with,” because “it doesn’t focus you on any one particular person.”<sup>52</sup>

At this stage, SNCC’s office and field workers rarely interfered with each other. Workshops and quarterly ‘all staff meetings’ functioned primarily as interstaff communication. In fact, Forman documented, press releases were “the best type of staff communication we have,” although “Bob has suggested that we get an interstaff memo” that highlighted workers’ field reports. Headquarters sometimes proposed rules

<sup>50</sup> Bob Moses to Lawrence Benenson, letters, May 15, 1962, no date, File #0378 and #0491, Reel 5, and James Forman to Russell Lasley, letter, May 9, 1962, File #0592, Reel 10, and Bob Moses to Harry Belafonte, letter, no date, File #0561, Reel 5, and Bob Moses to Guido Goldman, letter, October 22, 1962, File #0660, and Goldman to Moses, File #0662, Reel 6, Unknown sender to Forman, June 11, 1962, File #0232, Reel 8, William Miller to James Forman, letter, July 20, 1962, File #0945, Reel 7, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers.

<sup>51</sup> Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 75; “Registration Efforts in Mississippi Continue Despite Violence and Terror,” *The Student Voice* 3, no.3 (October 1962): 2, in *The Student Voice*, ed. Carson, 58; Murphree, *The Selling of Civil Rights*, 42; New Yorker to Moses, letter, October 31, 1962, File #1081-1082, Reel 11, Series VI, Bookkeeping Department, Financial Records, SNCC Papers.

<sup>52</sup> Moses interview Carson, 1982; Bob Moses to Hermann Rottenberg, letter, no date, File #1219, Reel 8, Forman to Moses, letter, June 11, 1962, File #0572, Reel 9, and “Report of Proceedings Conference on Direct Action Training, Dec. 15-19, 1962,” File #0536, Reel 8, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers.

that made sense from a public relations viewpoint, but not from the field-workers'. For example, later that year it created the position of state directors (Charles Sherrod became director of Georgia, Moses of Mississippi, etc.) but did so without consulting those involved. Moses recalled in 1984 that he "was made field director...by fiat. [It] just came out of the blue from Atlanta." This contradicted his view of letting the field staff determine who represented them: "It wasn't anything that the staff people in Mississippi got together [about] and said, 'We want to have this kind of organization.'" Yet he was too preoccupied to concern himself much with headquarters. Factually, he said, Mississippi staff had few contacts with the outside world, apart from the Justice Department and Friends of SNCC-chapters: "[W]e were pretty much isolated. I don't remember having much interface with SDS [or] other groups." The latter is remarkable considering that New Left groups avidly read Tom Hayden's writings on McComb<sup>53</sup> and that a growing overlap in SNCC and SDS-membership developed.<sup>54</sup>

Rather than unwillingness to participate in headquarters' affairs, Moses recalled in 1982 that he just "didn't think it through enough then." Like with organizing, "nobody sat down and theorized all this...you went down there and [tried] to do something...[Then] you learned what couldn't be done. That helped define what could be done." Afterward there was time for reflection, at staff meetings or retreats. Yet Moses' activities during 1960-1962 show that SNCC operated with relative precision. His trick was learning "everything you can about a town[,] slip in quietly, do your thing, and get out." Before going into southwest Georgia and Selma both Charles Sherrod and Bernard Lafayette did research. Arkansas SNCC-worker Worth Long insisted at one meeting that workers must "study in and about our area[s]" and "know current techniques" used elsewhere. SNCC's Research Department, founded in 1962 by Jack Minnis, helped them by providing contacts, statistics, legal briefs, and 'how to' guidelines<sup>55</sup>. SNCC regularly organized workshops, leadership training, and seminars to educate its members too. It invited anyone, as one document noted, "who would talk to us."<sup>56</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Tom Hayden's experiences in McComb transformed his views on the production of social change. Central in this was the beating he and Potter underwent, but he was also impressed with SNCC's need to operate largely in secret: "We went down to Mississippi...because there were phone calls coming from the SNCC office [that] police and rabid segregationists were trying to get into Mr. Ernest Noble's Cleaners...Moses and these other people were hiding in among the clothes and trying to call out...So we stayed at the Camillia Motel in McComb, then alternately would go to see George Guy and Oliver Emmerich...and they would rave and rant to us about these SNCC workers McDew and Zellner, who they wanted out of town, or worse, and then we would go meet with McDew at night. You'd have to hide in the back of a car and be driven to a gas station and then switch to another car and go to a house with curtains pulled and blankets nailed over windows so that nobody could see that there was a meeting about voter registration going on. Because the house would be blown up." (Greenberg ed., *Circle of Trust*, 71).

<sup>54</sup> Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 65; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Anne Romaine, September 1966/November 14, 1987, Anne Romaine Papers; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Joe Sinsheimer, December 5, 1984, Box 108, Folder 1, Taylor Branch Papers; Jim Forman to Lester McKinnie, letter, February 26, 1962, File #0844, Reel 7, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers; Agger, *The Sixties At 40*, 171, 184-185; Carson, *In Struggle*, 53-54. Some workers that belonged to both SDS and SNCC included Casey Hayden, Tim Jenkins, Bob Zellner, and Jim Monsonis. For more on SNCC's relations with SDS, see Hogan's *Many Minds, One Heart*.

<sup>55</sup> SNCC distributed "How To" guidelines among staff composed by field workers or outsiders, like the YWCA or even the American Baptist Education Society in 1890. These detailed the practice of organizing registration drives, direct action, or producing social change in general. All stressed pre-research, like analyzing the "organizations already operating in the community" and "critical changes" like "shifts in population, facts about people moving[,] new industries, new sources of power, loss or gain of markets, employment." Locals should be interviewed "to feel the pulse of the community" and workers should know the "social values on which the way of life in the [community] is based" because "we must forever be under the judgment of the community." Yet "[t]his does not mean that if it is contrary to our philosophy...to move in a particular direction, we nevertheless must," but rather "that whatever we do...must be executed after careful consideration of the people." ("How-to-do-it Guide for Organizing and Conducting a Voter Registration Drive," report, no date, File #0335-0338, Reel 23, Series VIII, Research Department, and "Memorandum by Mr. Frederick Gates, May 26, 1890," File #0517-0518, Reel 6, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers; Untitled SNCC Document, Box 6, Ella Baker Papers.)

<sup>56</sup> Moses interview Carson, 1982; Hammerback and Jensen, "'Working in 'Quiet Places,'" 10; Cagin and Dray, *We Are Not*

SNCC's project in Ruleville exemplified this blend of sophisticated planning and trial-and-error. In August Moses entered Sunflower County to assist the project that Amzie Moore and the Bevels had instigated. By now the COFO-workers' and the media's presence in Greenwood had alarmed whites in the Delta. Ruleville, a black majority city with 161 registered voters out of 13,524 eligible blacks, was particularly vigilant because Senator James Eastland's plantation was nearby. This gave Ruleville symbolic significance. As SNCC-worker Charles McLaurin recalled: "[I]f I could get something going in his territory... it would make me stand out." In early summer Moses and Moore canvassed Ruleville for two weeks, persuading six locals to register at the county courthouse in Indianola. Convinced that the project had potential, Moses drove students McLaurin, Dorie Ladner, Charles Cobb, James Jones, Landy McNair, and Jesse Harris to Cleveland in early August. On the way he "lectured [them] about the region's history," as Amzie Moore had done for him. Despite being briefly arrested by a gun-toting Mayor Charles Dorrrough, they soon opened a citizenship school, started canvassing with local youth, and accompanied potential registrants to the courthouse in Indianola.<sup>57</sup>

Canvassing was hard and often unpleasant. Going around in the hot sun talking endlessly to locals "wasn't very romantic," Cobb recounted in 1996, "It was slow[,] dangerous [and] boring" and nobody was "interested in what you were doing. It wasn't like we were doing this under the glare of the television lights." Then there was the "moral burden" of telling locals the negative consequences of registering. The key, Moses said, was to "convince them that nothing would happen[,] that their houses wouldn't be bombed, that they would not be shot at [or] lose their jobs, [but in Sunflower and Greenwood we] couldn't convince people [because] it wasn't true." Most feared violence at the courthouse rather than attacks on their homes, which they could protect with arms. Mississippi courthouses, Moses wrote in 2001, were "bastions of white power [with the capacity for] ugly Klan violence understood but kept well hidden until needed." Another canvasser summarized locals' inhibitions best: "If you couldn't read, couldn't bring yourself to confront a white person[,] couldn't find transportation[,] couldn't leave your obligations[,] couldn't quiet your wife who screamed in panic[,] couldn't think about anything except the hunger in your belly[,] you couldn't, wouldn't, didn't have the ballot."<sup>58</sup>

To overcome these hurdles, Moses reflected in 1986, organizers learned to "slow down and get into the motion of the people [and] move with them in ways which seem meaningful to them. [Much] of what turned out to be organizing, turned out to be patience." Yet "just the presence of the organizer," he noticed, "seems eventually to help as a catalyst." After all, "it's very important that the Negroes in the community feel that you're...going to ride through whenever trouble arrives...And in general, the deeper the fear[,] the longer you have to stay." Effective organizing, he stated, might even have to start with something as trivial as "bouncing a ball": "You stand on a street and bounce a ball. Soon all the children come around. You keep bouncing the ball. Before long, it runs under someone's porch and then you meet the adults." This slow building of relationships meant that during canvassing registration might not even be mentioned. Instead, McLaurin's notes read, workers should just "talk with the people, laugh with them...it's very important to learn what bugs them" irrespective of a connection with voting: "[F]irst meet

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*Afraid*, 321; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, xii; Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 196; Georgia meeting, minutes, December 14, 1962, File #0110, Reel 6, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 69; Murphree, *The Selling of Civil Rights*, 23.

<sup>57</sup> Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 635-636; Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 2000), 31; Todd Moya, *Let The People Decide: Black Freedom and White Resistance Movements in Sunflower County, Mississippi, 1945-1986* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 92-97; "Registration Efforts in Mississippi Continue Despite Violence and Terror," *The Student Voice* 3, no.3 (October 1962): 2, in *The Student Voice*, ed. Carson, 58.

<sup>58</sup> Charles Cobb, interview by John Rachal, October 21, 1996, transcript, Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi Collection, University of Southern Mississippi; King, *Freedom Song*, 130; Lynd, "Mississippi: 1961-1962.," Patricia Mosely, *A Reminiscence*, in *Freedom Is A Constant Struggle*, ed. Erenrich, 10-11; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 25; Marsh, *God's Long Summer*, 14.



the people on their own terms, or you lose.” He spent days in front of a grocery store, drinking sodas while its owner taught him local history. Slowing down also aided the workers’ psychological survival. As Moses put it: “[Y]ou can’t live as though you’re in very real danger every day...The communities we worked in didn’t live like that [so they showed us] how to take advantage of those times...you relaxed and deepened ties [that were] not directly connected to any specific political act,” like talking on a porch or helping locals with “whatever.”<sup>59</sup>

To overcome locals’ feelings that voting seemed too abstract, workers related it to their daily problems. McLaurin’s notes revealed that they “went from door to door telling people...how with the vote they would get better schools, jobs, paved streets.” Hollis Watkins agreed that canvassing was “much more educational than it was political.” Still many were hesitant. “I understand what you are saying,” they often responded, “except it’ll get me killed.” The “most important thing,” Moses maintained, was “to convince the local townspeople that we meant business.” Yet deciding which approach to use was always tricky, as one canvasser’s internal musings revealed: “Maybe I should have bullied him slightly, or maybe I should have talked less...Did I rush him? Should I never have mentioned registering [but] just tried to make friends?” Considering SNCC’s emphasis on ‘letting the people decide,’ the issue of manipulation made canvassing even more difficult. “[W]hen you organize, you *bother* people,” SNCC’s Bernice Johnson said, “There is an element in the organizer that’s slightly harassment.”<sup>60</sup>

Locals also feared embarrassment over their lack of education. Registration questions ranged from interpreting any of the state constitution’s 285 sections to “your understanding of the duties and obligations of citizenship under a constitutional form of government.” Most rural blacks were already lost after the phrase ‘to interpret.’ Some registrars tricked applicants with ridiculous questions—like writing a poem about the constitution—and disqualified them based on their answers. The workers’ most effective canvassing technique became presenting the form and asking if the person wanted to “sit down now and try to fill it out?” In doing so, Moses argued, blacks bridged a psychological gap by “[imagining] themselves at the registrar’s office.” At the citizenship school, Watkins recounted, they then took lines from the constitution like “there shall be no imprisonment for debt” to explain that ‘interpreting’ meant saying “you can’t go to jail for owing some money.” They also used Bible passages or newspapers, which were additionally used to acquaint locals with movement activities elsewhere. Other activities included describing registrars’ habits and building group morale, aided by speakers like Amzie Moore or Moses. Often they just focused on teaching literacy or calculus, for which they used SCLC’s literacy materials. “[T]he old people,” Sam Block wrote SCLC, “think the world of them...They tell the others, ‘this is my school book.’” Just taking the classes therefore was empowering for most southern blacks, having always been taught that education and the vote “wasn’t for them”—just as Moses’ classmates in elementary school had felt that taking citywide exams was ‘out of their range.’<sup>61</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by Blackside, Inc., May 19, 1986, for *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries; Lynd, “Mississippi: 1961-1962”; Elizabeth Sutherland-Martinez, ed., *Letters from Mississippi: Personal Reports from Civil Rights Volunteers of the 1964 Freedom Summer* (Brooklyn: Zephyr Press: 2002), 80-81; Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 243; Moyer, *Let the People Decide*, 103; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 68; Charles McLaurin, “Notes on Organizing,” report, no date, Files #0053-0055, Reel 40, Series XV, State Project Files, SNCC Papers.

<sup>60</sup> Poletta, *Strategy and Identity in 1960’s Black Protest*, 117-118; “Ruleville,” report by Charles McLaurin, August 18-31, 1962, Files #0954-0956, Reel Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers; Hollis Watkins and Charles Cobb, interviews by John Rachal, October 23, 29, 30, 1996, and October 21, 1996, transcript, Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi Collection, University of Southern Mississippi; Greenberg ed., *A Circle of Trust*, 122; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 46.

<sup>61</sup> “Mississippi voter registration test,” in *Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary*, ed. Rubin, 58-59; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 46; Hollis Watkins and Charles Cobb, interviews by John Rachal, October 23, 29, 30, 1996, and October 21, 1996, transcript, Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi Collection, University of Southern Mississippi; Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 149; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 634.

Essentially SNCC's political education programs were replicas of SCLC's citizenship schools in Georgia and South Carolina, which it had taken over from Highlander and which black women like Septima Clark and Dorothy Cotton pioneered. But despite this continuity SNCC-workers laid their own accents. Knowing the fear of embarrassment from competing academically with whites, Moses identified with Mississippi blacks in this respect. Witnessing their struggles strengthened his belief that to "overcome our slave conditions, we black people have to first overcome ourselves." This accelerated his gravitation towards working-class blacks. Perhaps more than most SNCC-workers, he became preoccupied with ideas of 'credentializing' people, meaning redefining who is qualified to do things on people's behalf, and what gives someone such a position. As his father and Ella Baker had taught him, educational titles or wealth were no such qualifiers. This realization evolved naturally from workers' interactions with locals, he asserted in 1964: "[F]or the first time certainly in my life I met people who seemed extremely simple in their conception of life but very direct in terms of what they wanted [with] elemental ideas about justice." SNCC-workers thus learned, in Stokely Carmichael's words, that "wisdom can come from the most unlikely of sources." For example, an uneducated elderly lady "might be highly influential simply because she was noted as a kind of personal problem-solver" within the community. Such people, Sherrod explained, "don't see themselves as being leaders, although they're just natural[s]...We find those people out." What started from practical and philosophical reasons over time thus grew into a solid operating principle to "exploit whatever sources of strength a particular locality offered, whether found in a pulpit or a whorehouse."<sup>62</sup>

The SNCC-workers discovered other innovative means of involving locals. After two weeks the Ruleville SNCC-workers organized a mass meeting at Williams Chapel. Forman, Bevel, and Moses spoke about blacks' constitutional rights, with Bevel almost shaming locals into action through a sermon on Luke 12:54-56 and Matthew 16:3, which called to act on the "signs of time" as one would to clouds indicating rain. At the end of the meeting eighteen locals agreed to register on August 31. One volunteer was 44-year-old Fannie Lou Hamer, a stout sharecropper with a limp from polio. Before then, she later claimed, "I'd never heard of no mass meeting" and "didn't know that a Negro could register," although she knew Amzie Moore, saw the Freedom Riders on the news, and had been an informal community leader at W.D. Marlow's plantation<sup>63</sup>. She, like Moore, was not someone SNCC 'discovered' or 'developed'; she was innately predisposed to activism. Hamer, Moses later said, "really represented what everyone was trying to...struggle for," namely "the promise of [those at the bottom of society] being able to find their inner spirit [and] put that to the service of a great social movement."<sup>64</sup>

Now heralded as *the* symbol of how 'ordinary people could do extraordinary things,' Hamer authenticates revisionist historians' stress on grassroots movements. Even in the 1960s SNCC's Communications Department deliberately built her up as such for the media. As Julian Bond admitted in 2008, "Our work...was to say everybody has the right to vote. They don't have to be literate...And she typified that. So to that extent, yes, we did try to elevate her." Occasionally, one of her biographers noted, Hamer purposely crafted "a public/historic image of herself" as well. She emphasized her "triumph over destitution" while avoiding the stereotypical stigma of needing outside help, which clearly "masked

<sup>62</sup> Katherine Mellen Charron, *Freedom's Teacher: The Life of Septima Clark* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 2, 5-7; Bob Moses, "Speech," (West Coast Civil Rights Conference, April 23, 1964), transcript, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, University of Southern Mississippi; Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready For Revolution*, 109; Watters and Reese, *Climbing Jacob's Ladder*, 106; Charles Sherrod, interview by Blackside, Inc., December 20, 1985, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries; Payne, *I've Got The Light Of Freedom*, 247-249.

<sup>63</sup> Having had six years of education—more than most sharecroppers—Fannie Lou Hamer worked as a timekeeper, who charted laborers' hours and cotton picked, and used that position to upgrade workers' pay when Marlowe cheated them.

<sup>64</sup> Moya, *Let The People Decide*, 97-100; Lee, *For Freedom's Sake*, 25; *Freedom On My Mind*, directed by Connie Field and Marilyn Mulford, Clarity Educational Productions, 1994; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 79-80.

the truth.” Hidden in such projection, especially by white observers, might be a certain class-bias, as the extraordinary contributions of black middle class leaders, like Victoria Gray or C.C. Bryant were often neglected. Northern whites swooned over stories like hers, and SNCC knew it.<sup>65</sup>

Yet in citing Hamer as validity for the ‘local people approach’ lies the danger of blurring the role that fulltime workers played in helping to bring the potential of locals like her to the surface. As Hamer told Charles McLaurin, she “had always wanted to get involved with something to help her people” but “didn’t know exactly how or what to do.” She added: “Everything you heard us [say] nobody tell us to say that. This is what’s been there all the time [but] nobody else had ever give us that chance” to express it. The mass meeting, which she at first declined to attend, and the presence of the SNCC-workers, provided a “turning point.” This does not mean that she, or those like her, otherwise had not become movement participants, but rather that the SNCC-workers accelerated the decision. The way in which SNCC-workers organized mass meetings, for instance, explains why, as her biographer Chana Kai Lee said, it “lit a fire in Hamer...to the point of helping her to ignore or forget her initial response.”<sup>66</sup>

Like canvassing, mass meetings were nothing new. Blacks were used to meetings where they listened to fiery speeches by acknowledged or self-proclaimed leaders. SNCC-workers, however, expanded the meetings’ democratic character and provided a space, Moses explained in 2001, that “demanded that Black people challenge themselves.” This dimension, he argued, “has been almost completely lost in the imagery of hand-clapping, song-filled rallies [which] define portrayals of 1960s civil rights meetings.” They were “training grounds, allowing participants to develop and emerge as political leaders.” In Mississippi this altered function directly reflected Moses’ influence. He related in 2010 that he “came to look upon the meeting as a fundamental [organizing] tool” when he “noticed that who spoke at a meeting depended on who [else] was speaking.” At a Jackson meeting he spoke but Lawrence Guyot challenged him. Then a local teenager, Lafayette Surney, “got up to challenge Guyot” but “never got up to speak when I spoke.” So “the issue really struck me [as to how] meetings become places where grassroots participants...feel free to [speak, so] we changed the style of the meeting.” Rather than formalized meetings with panels at which a few individuals asked questions or imposed knowledge, they turned it into a format in which *all* participants “were empowered. They weren’t just sitting there.”<sup>67</sup>

Following McLaurin’s notes that “apathy will disappear when you give...people some responsibility,” one strategy was to divide participants at mass meetings into small groups. Each submitted or chose one from a list of problems they considered relevant to their daily lives and discussed steps to alleviate it. Then they assigned people to execute the steps and report back at the next meeting. SNCC operated this way too: if workers were unable to solve an issue, it frequently composed a volunteer committee to research it and report their findings through an interstaff memo. Another meeting strategy became making ‘rights’-talk less abstract. When talking about voting SNCC-workers actually distributed applications and taught participants how to fill these in, like at the meeting Hamer attended, or reviewed the form collectively. They also gave public recognition to locals by letting *them* tell their stories. This equated their strength with that of acknowledged leaders on the platform, thereby ‘credentializing’ them. This way participants, historian Charles Payne observed, also “created a public face to themselves, which they then had to...live up to” and “helped [them] turn private...grievances into a collective consciousness of systematic oppression.” COFO-meetings became organizing tools in themselves as well, as locals from different areas mingled. This was necessary, Moses said, because “it was still difficult for people in Ruleville to see themselves connected to people in Liberty.”<sup>68</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Julian Bond, interview by author, Washington DC, October 27, 2008; Lee, *For Freedom’s Sake*, 42; McLaurin, “Notes on Organizing,” report, no date, Files #0053-0055, Reel 40, Series XV, State Project Files, SNCC Papers.

<sup>66</sup> Moyer, *Let The People Decide*, 97-100; Lee, *For Freedom’s Sake*, 25; Payne, *I’ve Got The Light of Freedom*, 154; Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long? African-American Women in the Struggle of Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press: 1997), 149.

<sup>67</sup> Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 71, 81, 87; Robert Parris Moses, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 15, 2010.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*; Lee, *For Freedom’s Sake*, 25; Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 259-261; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 71.

The key to an effective meeting was going to where participants themselves were. This required cultural knowledge, like the telling of stories from the animal world, and using religion and music. Particularly Hamer's encounter with 'freedom songs'—songs adapted from the church or the labor movement—at the Chapel "eliminated any doubt in her mind." Such songs were more than motivational tools, Bernard Lafayette stated: when "people develop songs about their local conditions...they have internalized the movement. [Then] the movement continues to move." However, as folk singer Theodore Bikel argued in 1964, the meetings and songs now inspired action whereas "they [had] failed to do so fifteen, twenty-five or forty years ago." The contrast flowed from "a shift of interpretation" in the relationship between religion and current events. Before, 'freedom' had referred to "the after-life," whereas after the sit-ins it was "read with an appended 'NOW.'" Bernice Johnson explained that for instance the biblical story of Paul and Silas in the song *Keep Your Eyes On the Prize* now had a different meaning. Ministers "preached about it like Paul and Silas were...so unique, incredible. They were in jail and they sang until they walked out. Now, once...you're in these cells, rocking [them with freedom] songs, and the jailers let you go because they can't stand it no more, Paul and Silas ain't got nothing on you." Even Moses' singing "Climbing Jacob's Ladder" in his mind on the way to the Liberty courthouse in 1961 was a reflection of this development, he recalled: "On the one hand, it was spiritual and on the other hand it had a wider political meaning, and it was all connected in this act of driving down to the courthouse." Freedom songs, historian Todd Moyer concluded, therefore were "instrumental" in creating "a movement culture."<sup>69</sup>

This additionally helps to explain why the religion-tinged 'Moses-legend' proved so effective in Mississippi. "[O]ne reason the Mississippi Project was one of SNCC's most successful," Stokely Carmichael stated, "was in no small part due to the fortuitous accident of Bob's last name." When Hamer addressed locals, she consciously compared him to the Biblical Moses to "guarantee that the time had arrived": "[God] sent a man to Mississippi with the same name...to tell [Governor] Ross Barnett to let my people go." Bikel likewise observed that Moses "has come to lead his people to freedom as did his namesake in Egypt. History's pun, perhaps, but was not the original Moses an 'outside agitator' too?" White liberal reporters now habitually used the imagery of a "saint" to describe him; Jack Newfield called him a "prophet." This made Moses increasingly uncomfortable. Feeling that it unduly revered his persona, he began warning locals more frequently and explicitly that "if you let it, the news media will tell you who your leaders are instead of your telling the news media." He stopped using the kind of religious imagery that appeared in his Magnolia letter, although he continued to treat workers' and locals' religious beliefs with "deep respect." This left even those closest to him wonder about his religious views, sometimes questioning their existence more than was accurate. In 2010 Dave Dennis recalled he "wouldn't know [whether Moses] went to church because he really believed in it as a way of life or [as] a tactic...I don't recall ever going to church with Bob, or seen Bob at church outside of the movement." Other SNCC-workers have admitted that they used religion deliberately as an organizing tool. For native workers like Hamer this came naturally,<sup>70</sup> but

<sup>69</sup> Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready For Revolution*, 292; Greenberg ed., *Circle of Trust*, 110-125, 190; Marsh, *God's Long Summer*, 26-27; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 259-263; Bernice Johnson Reason, "Women as Culture Carriers in the Civil Rights Movement: Fannie Lou Hamer," in *Freedom is a Constant Struggle*, ed. Erenrich, 401-402; Theodore Bikel, "We Shall Overcome...from Egypt to Mississippi," *Hootenanny*, January-February 1964, File #0565-0568, Reel 5, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers; Lassiter and Crespino, eds., *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism*, 127; Moyer, *Let The People Decide*, 100.

<sup>70</sup> Native workers like Hamer easily gave 'testimony' of her experiences, or told congregants, including reluctant preachers, to take being a Christian seriously, meaning that "[y]ou can pray until you faint but if you're not gonna get up and do something, God is not gonna put it in your lap." Unita Blackwell used phrases like "God helps those who help themselves" and Victoria Gray Isaiah 6:8 (the Lord said "'Whom can we send and who will go for us?' and I said, 'Here am I, send me, I'll go'") to motivate others. (Marsh, *God's Long Summer*, 25, 32, 163; Unita Blackwell, interview by Blackside, Inc. on May 7, 1986, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries; Greenberg ed., *A Circle of Trust*, 77)

atheists and agnostics in SNCC learned to recognize and cite passages from the Bible as well.<sup>71</sup>

Hamer and Moses developed a warm relationship; she later even stated that she loved him like a son. Moses first noticed Hamer on August 31, when she went with him, Charles McLaurin, Charlie Cobb, Amzie Moore, and the seventeen other locals on the voter registration trip to Indianola<sup>72</sup>. While Moses and McLaurin mingled with local blacks, Cobb waited outside the courthouse with the group. None of the applicants succeeded in registering. When riding home in a bus that Amzie Moore had rented for them, a highway patrolman followed them. Then “this wonderful woman,” Moses recalled in 1994, sang “every church song that you can imagine,” lighting “up the bus with her spirit.” The patrolman stopped the bus and fined the driver \$100 for having a bus “with too much yellow” on it so it might be mistaken for a school bus. Unable to pay the driver’s fine, the group offered to get arrested with him. The patrolman refused, arresting only the driver. Moses, Moore, and another SNCC-worker followed them to the Indianola courthouse, while the group waited as armed whites drove up and down. Eventually Moses returned, saying the fine had been reduced to \$32. All chipped in and the group returned home. The group’s solidarity was transformative for Hamer, who now “realize[d] the strength in numbers for community action.”<sup>73</sup>

That elation was soon tested when the newspapers printed the names of the ‘Indianola 18.’ W.D. Marlow evicted Hamer from the plantation, forcing her to move in with friends Mary and Robert Tucker and later to move to Tallahatchie County. She returned to Ruleville two months later when Moore found her a new home. Friends and SCEF paid her utility bills, which again underscored the need for outside intervention to sustain local activists. Moses then asked her to work fulltime for COFO and invited her to a leadership conference at Fisk University. Meanwhile other locals faced similar harassments. Two black cleaners were falsely closed for ‘building violations’; the Mayor cut off water and tax exemption for the Williams Chapel; and the U.S. Fidelity and Guaranty Company, located in Baltimore, cancelled the church’s insurance. This indicated the extent of northern complicity in southern illegality, Moses noted coolly in a complaint letter to the Company: “The thought occurred to me that [your company] would not want to be used to help coerce minority people who seek to exercise constitutional rights.” Moses was not safe either. When he and Moore walked across town, a white man in a pick-up invited them to his farm. Astonished, they agreed, only to be told: “I’ve got a shotgun waiting for you, double barrel.”<sup>74</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready For Revolution*, 31, 93-94, 289-291; Theodore Bikel, “We Shall Overcome...from Egypt to Mississippi,” *Hootenanny*, January-February 1964, File #0565-0568, Reel 5, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers; King, *Freedom Song*, 146; Newfield, *A Prophetic Minority*, 73; Cagin and Dray, *We Are Not Afraid*, 179; Bernice Johnson Reagon, “Women as Culture Carriers in the Civil Rights Movement: Fannie Lou Hamer,” in *Freedom is a Constant Struggle*, ed. Erenrich, 401-402; John C. Hammerback and Richard J. Jensen, “Robert Parris Moses (1935 - ), civil rights activist, social activist, professor,” in *African-American Orators: A Bio-Critical Sourcebook* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996), ed. Richard W. Leeman, 264; Dave Dennis, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 17, 2010; Heather Tobis Booth, email interview by author, November 2009.

<sup>72</sup> Initially Moses reneged on going, since he and 3 other workers were arrested there the day before for distributing leaflets without a permit. To not delay the registration drive, Bevel and Forman bailed them out while the police chief rebuked them: “We don’t need no outside agitators coming in here, stirring up the people...so that they can’t think straight.” Feeling morally committed, Moses went anyway. (“Registration Efforts in Mississippi Continue Despite Violence and Terror,” *The Student Voice* 3, no.3 (October 1962): 2, in *The Student Voice*, ed. Carson, 58)

<sup>73</sup> Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 307; Lynd, “Mississippi: 1961-1962”; Moya, *Let the People Decide*, 98-101; Lee, *For Freedom’s Sake*, 27-37; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 636-639; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 78, 80; *Freedom On My Mind*, directed by Connie Field and Marilyn Mulford, Clarity Educational Productions, 1994; in *On The Road To Freedom*, Cobb states that Hamer was already singing on the way to Indianola as well (page 305).

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*; Amzie Moore to SCEF, letter, 1962, Box 55, Folder 13, Carl and Anne Braden Papers; Marsh, *God’s Long Summer*, 17; News Release, September 17, 1962, File #0146, Reel 10, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers; Watters and Cleghorn, *Climbing Jacob’s Ladder*, 139.

The most violent reprisal came on September 10 when nightriders shot into the homes of the Tucker, McDonald, and Sisson families. Hattie Sisson had earlier attempted to register with McLaurin. The Sisson home, Cobb documented, showed twenty bullet holes with “pools of blood...all over the living room floor.” Granddaughter Vivian Hillet and friend Marylene Burks were shot: Burks in the head and neck, Hillet in the arms and legs. They barely survived. Distressed, Cobb unsuccessfully called Moore, and then Moses, who was in Jackson. Moses suggested he informed the Justice Department and went to the hospital. There Mayor Dorrrough, who also served as justice of the peace, arrested Cobb for “asking a lot of silly questions.” Together they returned to the Sissons, where, one local testified, Dorrrough told the sheriff on the phone: “Moses is the cause of all this.” He ordered the Sisson family not to clean up the bloodstains until the FBI could determine “whether it’s human.” S.D. Milam, brother of one of Emmett Till’s murderers, transported Cobb to jail.<sup>75</sup>

The situation worsened when Moses and other workers departed Jackson at 2 A.M. for Ruleville in a broken car that kept stalling at slow speed. This “added to the general fatigue and nervousness,” Moses recorded afterwards. When driver James Jones fell asleep behind the wheel they hit a road sign and came to a stop in a cotton field. Shaken but unharmed, they packed into a second car of workers behind them. The sheriff issued an arrest warrant for Moses, in whose name the car was registered, for reckless driving and leaving the scene of an accident. Represented by Carsie Hall, Moses and Jones later plead guilty and paid a \$120 fee. When Moses finally arrived in Ruleville to interview witnesses, the sheriff threatened to arrest him for interfering with a police investigation. MSSC-investigator Tom Scarbrough (who believed that Carl Braden had driven Moses) reported dismayed that Moses “acted like he was some special government investigator.” Undeterred, the SNCC-workers continued interviewing witnesses, and Moses sent detailed reports to the FBI, the media, and the Justice Department. On September 13 President Kennedy called the shootings and recent church burnings in Albany “cowardly as well as outrageous” and now openly vowed protection for registration workers: “[I]f it requires extra legislation, and extra force, we shall do that.” He touted the FBI’s presence and assured the assailants’ prosecution. In reality, McLaurin reported, the FBI “didn’t seem to be looking” for the perpetrators and “did more to frighten people than to help them.” Despite the SNCC-workers’ newfound means of involving locals, they had to spend much of September regaining the community’s trust. Barely mentioning voting, they went “house to house asking people about everyday problems[,] carry them to the store downtown, help pick cotton and chop wood.”<sup>76</sup>

### 5.3. Never Seen a Nigga Like That

SNCC projects in other states developed the same slow organizing approach that Moses pioneered in Mississippi. In Georgia, for example, SNCC ran registration projects in Terrell, Lee, Sumter, and Dougherty counties; within two years they had covered 22 rural counties. In 1962-1963 Georgia had twelve fulltime SNCC-workers<sup>77</sup>. Like SNCC-workers in Mississippi, most of them used nonviolence as a

<sup>75</sup> “Shooting Incident in Ruleville,” memorandum Bob Moses and Charles Cobb, October 8, 1962, File #00365-00371 and “Report,” Charles Cobb, 1962, File #00372-00373, Reel 5, Part 4, Series I, Records of Andrew J. Young, Records SCLC; Lynd, “Mississippi: 1961-1962.”

<sup>76</sup> Tom Scarbrough, “Humphreys County (Robert Moses, Negro Male),” September 13, 1962, and Untitled Report, no date, reports, Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission Online, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, [http://mdah.state.ms.us/arrec/digital\\_archives/sovcom/](http://mdah.state.ms.us/arrec/digital_archives/sovcom/) (accessed November 22, 2007); Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 82-84; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 638-639; Russell, *Black Genius*, 332; Joseph A. Loftus, “Kennedy Decries Church Burnings in Racial Dispute,” and “Transcript of the President’s News Conference on Foreign and Domestic Matters,” *New York Times*, September 14, 1962; Moye, *Let The People Decide*, 102-103.

<sup>77</sup> By spring 1963, the twelve workers were: 1. Prathia Hall, 22, black, from Philadelphia, divinity student Temple University; 2. Jack Chatfield, 20, white, from Bradford, Vt., student Trinity College; 3. Carver Neblett, 19, black, student Southern Illinois University; 4. John Churchville, 21, black, from New York, student Temple University; 5. Joyce Barrett, 24, white, from Philadelphia, graduate Temple University; 6. Don Harris, 21, black, from New York, graduate Rutgers



tactic. In each county, a 1963 report stated, workers held mass meetings, citizenship classes, did “tedious canvassing,” and organized courthouse trips. “Special efforts” were directed at teachers and ministers, but their core constituency was the working class, whose daunting conditions they shared. Workers sometimes went hungry, Bill Hansen reported, because most of the Negro community was too frightened to associate with them. They painted houses, picked squash, and fished for survival. Like their co-workers in Mississippi, they encountered church burnings and shootings. Jack Chatfield was wounded twice; two others were grazed by bullets. Hansen was beaten in jail with police permission. “My nerves are about completely shot,” he wrote in August. Yet generally, the 1963 report stated, “the terror...is at a much higher pitch” in Mississippi in terms of “outright violence,” “more difficulty in obtaining a place to meet,” and in “convincing local leaders...to take an active stand.” Consequently, by late 1963 the Georgia project had registered a few hundred voters; in Mississippi the number was much lower.<sup>78</sup>

The Georgia and Mississippi projects differed in other respects. Georgia lacked a COFO-like vehicle. In addition, the staff of the Southwest Georgia Project included only two native blacks. The others were from outside the state, and half were white. This reflected Charles Sherrod’s insistence on integration: “[T]he means should at all times reflect the end.” The inclusion of whites also had a practical benefit, he admitted: “[W]hen the white folks get in trouble, we get out of trouble,” meaning that arrests and violent incidents generated press coverage. While equally committed to interracialism, Bob Zellner’s beating in McComb had shown Moses that using whites in Mississippi was counterproductive. The 1963 report agreed it was “too dangerous for whites to participate in the project in Mississippi.” Moses added that “SNCC itself had never really resolved what it meant by integration [so] we more or less left the idea alone...We talked local leadership instead.”<sup>79</sup>

Sherrod’s stress on interracialism derived from his religious convictions, which were consistent with SNCC’s Statement of Purpose. His state directorship accordingly appealed to other religiously inclined workers, allowing for religion to become an integral part of the projects’ daily life. Sherrod introduced ‘Prayer Breakfasts’ each morning and insisted on using religion with locals. “This is a part of accepting the people...where they are,” he explained. He regularly used phrases like “it’s people like you, with faith in God, who are going to change this country.” Like fellow-minister James Bevel, one worker observed, Sherrod “really gave sermons when he spoke to people[,] just quoting from the Bible.” “[T]his is a perfect way to talk to these people,” Julian Bond noted in 2008, because “it relates to them [and it’s] who he is.”<sup>80</sup>

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University; 7. Ralph Allen, 22, white, from Melrose, Mass., student Trinity College; 8. Eddie Brown, 20, black, from Albany, student Monroe High School; 9. Faith Holseart, 20, white, from Brooklyn, N.Y., student Bernard College; 10. Alphonzo Hubbard, 17, black, Albany, student Monroe High School; 11. Joni Rabinowitz, 20, white, from New Rochelle, N.Y., student Antioch; 12. Sherrod.

<sup>78</sup> Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 28, 71; “SNCC Field Work in Mississippi,” report, spring 1963, File #0057-0058, Reel 10, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers; Charles Sherrod, interview by Blackside, Inc., December 20, 1985, for *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries; “SNCC Field Work in Southwest Georgia,” report, spring 1963, in *Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary*, ed. Rubin, 38; Carson, *In Struggle*, 77; Murphree, *The Selling of Civil Rights*, 31; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 67-68; Greenberg ed., *A Circle of Trust*, 56; “Churches Burned, Nightriders Attack SNCC Staff In Southwest Georgia Voter Registration Drive,” *The Student Voice* 3, no.3 (October 1962) 1-2, in *The Student Voice*, ed. Carson, 57-58; Bill Hansen to SNCC, Field Reports, June 26, July 6, July 23, August 1, 1962, Adam Fairclough private collection.

<sup>79</sup> Carson, *In Struggle*, 75-77; Zellner, *The Wrong Side of Murder Creek*, 174-175; Mississippi’s ‘Freedom Summer’ Reviewed, conference October 30 - November 2, 1979, transcript, Session 2, Folder 3, Mississippi’s ‘Freedom Summer’ Reviewed Collection; King, *Freedom Song*, 71, 497, 505; “SNCC Field Work in Mississippi,” report, spring 1963, File #0057-0058, Reel 10, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers; Charles Sherrod, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 16, 2010; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 151.

<sup>80</sup> Greenberg ed., *A Circle of Trust*, 56; Untitled paper on Terrell County, no date, Box 1, Folder 13 and Report Guy Carawan, Box 2, Folder 9, Howard Zinn Papers; Julian Bond, interview by author, Washington DC, October 27, 2008; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 74-75.

Sherrrod's and Bevel's flamboyant southern preacher styles contrasted starkly with Moses' soft, monotone speech. Sherrrod could be feisty, engaging in demonstrations as eagerly as in voter registration. He sat-in at Robert Kennedy's office once and literally jumped him when Kennedy tried to persuade SNCC away from direct action, shouting: "It is not your responsibility, before God or under the law, to tell us how to honor our constitutional rights. It's your job to protect us when we do." Simultaneously he could be patient. An Albany black once repeated to him: "People treat me like a dog...Do I look like a dog? Do I look like a dog?" Sherrrod listened for "several hours...eyes focused intently on the man. Afterward, word spread through the community that [SNCC] really cared." Bevel was a different character altogether. John Lewis described him as "Wild. Crazy. Nuttier than nut. Brilliant. Passionate. Eccentric...[H]e had an irresistible confidence about him that gave those around him...no choice but to pay attention." But he also listened and was open to new concepts, like Smith's campaign. Later Bevel suffered borderline psychotic spells, but in the sixties, Taylor Branch wrote, he used "gossip about his wobbly mind" to propel the movement, saying that blacks "needed to be crazy in order to dream of freedom." His "high-fevered ecstasy" was highly effective in motivating locals, as his role in McComb and Hamer's first meeting exhibited, although Bevel's style ultimately proved more suitable for SCLC's goal of mobilization than for SNCC's community organizing.<sup>81</sup>

Moses in turn was shy and his speech studied. In 1965 Robert Penn Warren described his language as "slow but with enunciation almost pedagogically careful." Movement participants praised his ability to get to the point without slipping into emotional language or hollow slogans. Journalists noted that he spoke calmly "with the rhythms of a man crossing a stream, hopping from rock to rock." Communication scholars observed that his speeches mainly featured facts, names, and dates, like history lessons. Some contemporaries accordingly dismissed him as a "moody, murky intellectual"; one reporter actually termed him "an outstandingly poor speaker." Even Tom Scarborough criticized Moses' "slurred way" of speaking, although, in a way, it was reminiscent of a southern drawl.<sup>82</sup>

Historians, however, have argued that Moses was "an outstanding, effective speaker" because his rhetoric met "his purposes and fit his persona." While Worth Long's claim that "Moses deliberately rejected the role of orator because it was the traditional role of Black leadership" overstates his intent, those who knew him recognized that his style in itself carried a message. Moses' goal was to project local leadership, not his own. Accordingly, Stokely Carmichael observed, he was not "interested in impressing you [but in concentrating] on the problem [and] get[ting] you to move beyond the superficial and focus on *ideas* too." He often underscored this message, especially with uneducated audiences, by speaking from the back, engaging an audience in conversation, or raising questions rather than answering them. This was a way of moral leadership by example, Casey Hayden argued: "Bob set an example through practice, gaining loyalty by listening, [which] helped individuals empower themselves."<sup>83</sup>

For those working *with* Moses, his style added to his charisma, which, scholar Ann Ruth Willner asserted, is in the eye of the beholder. "[C]harisma is defined in terms of people's perceptions of and responses to a leader. It is not what the leader is but what people see the leader as." This also applied to Moses. "Moses was 'perhaps the most trusted, the most loved, the most gifted organizationally of any southern Negro leader' *precisely because* he seemed humble, ordinary, accessible," wrote SDS-veteran

<sup>81</sup> "NAG Plans May 17 Demonstrations in DC," *The Student Voice* 3, no.1 (April 1962): 3, in *The Student Voice*, ed. Carson, 51; King, *Freedom Song*, 158; Lewis and D'Orso, *Walking with the Wind*, 60-61, 177; Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 54; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 480.

<sup>82</sup> Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?* 48-49; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 188; Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 310-313; Hammerback and Jensen, "Your Tools Are Really The People," 126-140; Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 148; Halberstam, *The Children*, 402; Tom Scarborough, "Leflore County—Samuel Block and Robert Moses," investigative report, August 14, 1962, Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission Online, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, [http://mdah.state.ms.us/arrec/digital\\_archives/sovcom/](http://mdah.state.ms.us/arrec/digital_archives/sovcom/) (accessed November 22, 2007).

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 333; Hammerback and Jensen, "Robert Parris Moses," in *African-American Orators*, ed. Leeman, 263; Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready For Revolution*, 310-313.

Todd Gitlin, “The early New Left...wanted elemental talk, not grand rhetoric.” Instances of praise from supporters are abundant. Mary King recalled feeling her chest muscles quicken when Moses spoke and others savored his ability to “communicate a soothing, spiritual depth.” At one SNCC-conference Moses is said to have held a 600-man audience “at seat’s edge...for over an hour.” After speaking at Stanford University he received a five-minute standing ovation. Moses’ understatement could also be humorous. Warren documented a Mississippi meeting which whites wanted to invade. Moses “orders two men to the door to keep out any unauthorized persons. Then, even more calmly...he says: ‘Be gentle with them.’ The audience thinks it is very funny.”<sup>84</sup>

Moses’ speech was effective because it reflected *who he was*—even though, as Mary King admitted, he “well understood that we were engaged in certain forms of political theater.” Cobb rendered a discussion of charisma obsolete by reducing it to personality: “I don’t think [Martin Luther] King could be what Bob was anymore than Bob could be what King [was].” Reserve had always defined his character, and his upbringing and education had reinforced that characteristic. In 1993 Moses said that Amzie Moore had strengthened this tendency by advising him never to “telegraph what you’re doing.” For example, “Amzie rarely told me where we were going until we were well on our way” to protect himself. Above all his silence reflected his concern for morality and his fear of leading people, like Louis Allen, into something beyond his control. He intuitively felt that his speech should reflect the practical. As he told *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1964: “[O]ne of the things wrong with this country is that everyone is saying too much...It’s wrong to promise more than you can give. To accomplish something very real, you have to do something very limited.” In Mississippi, he added in 1993, he had learned that “you always had to understate everything because the problem itself was too big...What you had to show people was that you were actually biting off a small piece of the problem and you were actually doing that...I didn’t sit down and think this through[,] but my reaction...was, you don’t mislead people by promising what you can’t deliver [but] only to talk really in very specific terms. Like what we’re going to do next...I didn’t know any other way to talk there.”<sup>85</sup>

Moses’ approach benefitted from SNCC’s culture of participatory democracy. Within all southern state projects, Howard Zinn explained in 1965, decisions were made on an “intermediate” level “by the people on the spot [like Henry, Moses, and Sherrod] in conjunction with the people in the organization... in the field. [Then] local people...were brought in [and then] national headquarters.” There were thus two ‘aboves’: SNCC’s national headquarters and a “local above” composed of the main players, like the state directors. The latter “above” outranked the first. For Moses this was a matter of principle: “How could you set up [a structure] where there’s some people who have good jobs and are working somewhere safe in society, and they...decide policy which some other people [have to execute] for nothing at the risk of their lives?...I couldn’t find [a justification for] it...I would never agree to that kind of procedure for the work that we were doing.” Casey Hayden agreed: “We couldn’t go on if we didn’t give everybody the space to...get to where we were all comfortable...We couldn’t ask each other to risk our lives.” This also applied to SNCC headquarters, Stokely Carmichael argued: “We always laughed at these theoretical formulations [of our structure]” because “we never proclaimed that [SNCC] *had* to proceed by consensus.” Yet “[a]ll you *could*

<sup>84</sup> Ann Ruth Willner, *The Spellbinders: Charismatic Political Leadership* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 14; King, *Freedom Song*, 146; Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?* 48-49; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 188; Hammerback and Jensen, “Your Tools Are Really The People,” 126-140; Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 148.

<sup>85</sup> Mary King, email interview by author, December 8, 2009; Charlie Cobb, interview by John Rachal, October 21, 1996, and Amzie Moore, interview by Michael Garvey, March 29 and April 13, 1977, transcripts, Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi Collection, University of Southern Mississippi; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 40; James Atwater, “If We Can Crack Mississippi,” *Saturday Evening Post*, July 2, 1964; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Charles Payne, August 1993, in *Debating the Civil Rights Movement*, Lawson and Payne, 175-176, 183. Occasionally his sparseness also reflected self-protection, Sherrod claimed in 2010: “If you asked him a question [he’d be] too busy. He had too many [problems] bothering him.” (Charles Sherrod, interview by author, April 16, 2010)

do is talk...because the issues are deadly serious." What emerged was then not so much a philosophy but "really a 'culture,' a way of dealing among ourselves" and locals that was "simply necessary."<sup>86</sup>

Howard Zinn believed that Bob Moses decisively influenced the development of participatory democracy within SNCC. Moses, he wrote in 1965, had thought it through more than most. Without him, Dave Dennis agreed, "there would not have been a Mississippi project...of the nature that it was." At staff meetings Moses consistently dealt with conflict through consensus, but "was not particularly outspoken" on the subject of participatory democracy. Mary King believed that he simply "assumed it was our method of functioning." Considering his shyness and experience with the Quakers, however, it was a natural approach for him. In 2009 John Lewis recalled that Moses dealt with conflict by doing what "in the religious tradition [is called] tarry, [that is] almost waiting on a spirit...you talk and you talk with individuals and don't give up on them." When someone "made a mistake" he reacted "nonviolently" by not rebuking people. If disagreements emerged, King agreed, he tried not to personalize them, even when directed at him. After all, one reporter noted, his "insistence on including everybody in meetings—and requiring meetings for just about everything—can exhaust even the most faithful." Yet mostly, Lewis said, workers kept their disagreements "to themselves...because there was so much respect[,] affection and love for the man." At this stage, moreover, disputes were usually minor and the group small. Even if workers and locals were not "personally attached to him," one SNCC-veteran stated, they appreciated Moses as "the quiet kind of fellow that would get things done."<sup>87</sup>

In practice participatory democracy was more complicated than seemed. Charles Sherrod, for example, personified a tendency within SNCC to impose views on locals and staff. He openly advised colleagues not to "let the project go to the dogs because you feel you must be democratic to the letter or carry out every parliamentary procedure." He understood his influence well, he admitted in 2010: "[W]e had a preacher named Samuel Wells; he was pushing *me* [but occasionally] I would come against a point [or strategy] he had to make...If I wanted to, I had the last word." His "ability to sway the thinking of a group" often frustrated workers too, they complained in a 1963 report: "Sherrod, when he is there, is sole administrator...He handles the money[,] makes assignments, and all decisions concerning the project policy—in reality the group meets...but even they realize that the policy is already made"<sup>88</sup>. With a flamboyant personality as his, Stokely Carmichael likewise admitted that inevitably he "wasn't able to keep" his rule of leading without bombast or fiat. In meetings he occasionally took a local aside, explained the issue, and sent the person on stage to talk "as if [s]he's always known it." SNCC-workers in Albany reported writing "prepared speeches for local leaders," and in a June meeting Charles Jones dismissed Albany Movement president Dr. Anderson, a black osteopath, as "not really a leader," arguing that "he must be led by the Strategy Committee." Moses himself occasionally pushed decisions too. In 2011 Luvagh Brown recounted that he had a "quiet insistence when he felt...things should be approached a certain way." Dorie Ladner agreed that "ultimately what he had to say, he would say it." Historians August Meier and Elliot Rudwick recorded that Moses "in actual fact often made basic COFO decisions." Dave

<sup>86</sup> Howard Zinn, interview, November 11, 1965, Box 3, Folder 10, Howard Zinn Papers; Moses interview Carson, 1982; Greenberg ed., *A Circle of Trust*, 134, 185-186.

<sup>87</sup> Howard Zinn, interview, November 11, 1965, Box 3, Folder 10, Howard Zinn Papers; Dave Dennis, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 17, 2010; John Lewis, interview by author, Washington, DC, November 16, 2009; Mary King, email interviews by author, December 8, 2009; Julia Cass, "The Moses Factor," *Mother Jones*, May/June 2002, <http://motherjones.com/politics/2002/05/moses-factor> (accessed May 12, 2008); Robert E. Wright, interview by John Britton, July 22, 1968, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University.

<sup>88</sup> The Georgia workers also criticized Sherrod's power "to say when an [individual worker] should come out of his present project and go to another." Jean Wheeler Smith and Martha Norman for instance wanted to leave for Greenwood, but Sherrod refused, "so we waited for Sherrod to go to jail, and as soon as he went...we left at midnight." This contrasted starkly with Moses, who asked Smith in 1964 to attend the Democratic convention. She declined: "He said, 'Fine,' he got back on the bus and I stayed." ("Southwest Georgia," report, 1963, File #1016, Reel 9, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 151; Greenberg ed., *A Circle of Trust*, 137-138)

Dennis admitted as much when he stated that “Bob or myself...did sort of shove things down sometimes to get things moving in [a] certain direction that maybe was not understood at the time.” But overall, Charlie Cobb argued, “we were organizers in Mississippi, not leaders, even if at moments we led. The distinction was important to us, and a practical necessity.”<sup>89</sup>

Moses accordingly gained a reputation for trying to live up to the principles of participatory democracy, grassroots leadership, and personal freedom. Many viewed him, in Taylor Branch’s words, as “the anti-King within SNCC.” Yet Mary King rejected the notion that his approach was one of ‘anti-leadership.’ “Bob was not against leadership,” she explained in 2009, “He cared deeply about leadership and had thought profoundly about it.” Moreover, his age explained part of his unusual commitment to these principles compared to other SNCC-workers: “A lack of maturity was both strength and weakness for SNCC...Some may not have understood Bob’s depths of commitment to raising up leaders who could speak for the oppressed, which concomitantly requires decentralization.”<sup>90</sup>

Moses implemented these principles, historian Charles Payne argued, by turning “everything into a lesson.” He let locals do his public speaking or answer his mail after teaching them these skills. One was 15-year-old Greenwood prostitute Endesha Mae Holland, who became a movement regular after Moses taught her how to type. She felt special whenever he chose her, she related in 1994: “I was so glad to be used for something. While the whole town was looking down on me, the movement said, ‘You are somebody.’” She eventually became a professor, but her transformation never received as widespread attention as Fannie Lou Hamer’s, most likely because of her ‘disreputable’ background. Moses’ own actions were teaching moments in themselves too. Unita Blackwell remembered feeling empowered when witnessing Moses confront state authorities, she said in 1968: “Moses was a little bitty fella. And he stood up to this sheriff...I had never saw that happen before. From that day on, I said, ‘Well, I can stand myself.’”<sup>91</sup>

How Moses involved another Greenwood fifteen-year-old, June Johnson, illustrates his slow organizing approach. Having watched him for days, she finally asked him if he was a Freedom Rider. He responded by asking about her family and offered to carry her books. June then asked Moses to meet her mother. The latter disliked June’s and her brother Waite’s involvement, but quickly became fond of Moses, who, Waite said, “had a special charisma with the old folks. They just seemed to trust him.” Within several months June was allowed to attend meetings “so long as Bob or Annelle [Ponder] was around.” A “special plea” by Moses even allowed her to go to Septima Clark’s citizenship school in South Carolina in June 1963. June later termed him ‘The Person Who Influenced Me Most’ in an essay, because he had taught her “that the most important thing...is education and becoming a first-class citizen” and about “people who I

<sup>89</sup> Charles Sherrod, interview by Blackside, Inc., December 20, 1985, for *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 60, 75, 79; Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 318; Greenberg ed., *A Circle of Trust*, 90; Poletta, *Strategy and Identity in 1960’s Black Protest*, 175; Sherrod, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 16, 2010; “Southwest Georgia,” report, 1963, File #1016, Reel 9, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers. Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 385-386; Murphree, *The Selling of Civil Rights*, 31; SNCC Staff Meeting, minutes, June 3, 1962, Adam Fairclough private collection; Luvaghn Brown, email interviews by author with Luvaghn Brown, January 13 and 31, 2011; Dorie Ladner, interview by author, Washington DC, November 16, 2009; Charles Cobb, interview by John Rachal, October 21, 1996, transcript, Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi Collection, University of Southern Mississippi; Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 394; Dave Dennis, interview by Blackside, Inc., November 10, 1985, for *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries; Charlie Cobb, “Organizing Freedom Schools,” in *Freedom is a Constant Struggle*, ed. Erenrich, 134; Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 335.

<sup>90</sup> Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge*, 30; Mary King, email interview by author, December 8, 2009.

<sup>91</sup> Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 334; *Freedom On My Mind*, directed by Connie Field and Marilyn Mulford, Clarity Educational Productions, 1994; Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 313, 320-321; Hampton and Fayer, *Voices of Freedom*, 180.

didn't know." Everyone respected him, she noted, because he was "beaten for us." She emphasized how the fulltime workers' presence bolstered local agency: "[I]f we could get more men like Bob Moses into Greenwood our problems would soon be over...If he and the other workers hadn't come...we would be the same Uncle Toms—afraid to walk and talk for our rights."<sup>92</sup>

Like all COFO-workers Moses, Dorie Ladner reflected in 2009, "was learning in the process as well," although "you would never know [how] because he was very quiet." As an erudite Northerner he had much to learn about southern black life, but overcame this hiatus through his genuine care for locals. As in McComb he developed personal relations with Greenwood blacks. "Bob would actually *merge* in," Dave Dennis claimed in 2010, "He dealt with them as family...It wasn't just like a strategy around them." He accordingly promoted what "the extended family is all about" and transported this to his coworkers: "The closeness we all had, had a lot to do with the Moses personality." This included looking after them once confrontations were over, like following the Burgland students to Jackson and returning to Amite during Rev. Smith's campaign. Greenwood was no different. When June Johnson returned from South Carolina, she and other participants were arrested for attending a white restroom in Winona, Mississippi. In jail she, Annelle Ponder, and Fannie Lou Hamer were brutally beaten; June lost consciousness twice. With Moses' aid, SNCC-worker Marian Wright arranged for her to go to a summer camp in Connecticut a month later, although she spoke at meetings days after. Moses encouraged its director to "have her tell you about the beating," that is, "if you can get June to talk." He often arranged such trips North for Mississippi students, and helped them to secure scholarships. "Negro students coming out of the Mississippi school system...need remedial work," he wrote a Minnesota professor. One was Curtis Hayes, whose "life and development," he wrote Wright, "has special meaning for me."<sup>93</sup>

Moses' cosmopolitan background proved a valuable asset. Apart from his ability to utilize Northern connections, he was praised for his intelligence. Even Aaron Henry admitted that Moses' "ideas usually became SNCC policy in short order." Marion Barry agreed in 1965 that the "one person who charted [Mississippi's political] course would be Bob," although "sometimes we all agreed with him, sometimes we didn't." Usually they did: "It just happened that you agree once you hear [his ideas], they sound so exciting." His intelligence impressed locals even more. One said that Moses "sees real far into the future, and a lot of time the people...can't keep up with him." Yet locals, Ladner said in 2009, "wanted to hear what somebody had to say of society...we were looking for the outside world to...help educate us." Sharecropper L.C. Dorsey related that Moses "kept putting the questions out: 'Why do you think that is? What do you think we ought to do about that?'" He'd listen to what you said and force you to think about it. That was his genius."<sup>94</sup>

<sup>92</sup> Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 68-69; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 226, 240; June Johnson, "The Person Who Influenced Me Most," no date (William Heath Papers).

<sup>93</sup> Dorie Ladner, interview by author, Washington, DC, November 16, 2009; Dave Dennis, interview by author, April 17, 2010; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 227-228; Moses to Jay Stager (Camp Director 'Camp Claire' in Hamburg, Connecticut), letter, July 6, 1963, and Stager to Moses, letter, no date, Files #1192 and #1347, Reel 69, and Moses to Professor Lonero, letter, February 16, 1964, #0462, Reel 64, Appendix A: MFDP Papers, and Moses to Marian Wright and Jim Forman, letters, no date, Files #0032-0033. Moses even loaned \$100 from SNCC for Hayes to get started in Chicago. Months after leaving McComb, SNCC-workers also still tried to get Brenda Travis released from Oakley. She was eventually allowed custody with a white professor in Alabama, but when a judge overturned this decision, Baker became her guardian. ("Getting Miss Brenda Travis out of a Mississippi jail," report, April 1962, File #1203, Reel 6, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers; Charles B. Gordon, "McComb Girl Gets Buildup After Release to Professor" and "White Teacher No Longer Has Custody On Negro Girl," *The Clarion-Ledger*, May 17 and July 27, 1962; Grant, *Ella Baker*, 145; Dittmer, *Local People*, 171-173)

<sup>94</sup> Henry and Curry, *Aaron Henry*, 115; Marion Barry, interview by Howard Zinn, December 18, 1965, Box 3, Folder 10, Howard Zinn Papers; Dorie Ladner, interview by author, Washington DC, November 16, 2009; King, *Freedom Song*, 146; George Raymond, interview by Robert Wright, September 28, 1968, transcripts, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University; Julia Cass, "The Moses Factor," *Mother Jones*, May/June 2002, <http://motherjones.com/politics/2002/05/moses-factor> (accessed May 12, 2008).



Despite Moses' egalitarian, family-style approach, his background and personality distinguished him. When he spoke his cosmopolitan training was unmistakably present. Historians Seth Cagin and Philip Dray describe his general attitude: "He might discuss the demeanor of the Amite County sheriff[,] offer tactical advice on how to win over a reluctant NAACP leader, then skip to the moral complexities of urging others to nonviolence, before managing to tie it all to the humanism of Camus and Bertrand Russell." Yet overall Moses waited for others to speak before he offered his own thoughts. As Dorie Ladner recalled: "After we were finished debating for hours[,] screaming and yelling at each other, we [all would] wait for Bob to say something." Luvaghn Brown stressed that Moses "was sort of 'apart from.'" MacArthur Cotton underscored this in a 1968 interview: "I had never seen a nigga like that before...he was definitely in a different class from anybody I'd ever know." Yet this was a blessing, Brown argued. "Coming from the outside gave Bob a perspective we did not have. His mind was free of the baggage that many of us picked up at childhood." Lacking this "sense of acceptance" made him seem "reckless to some of us that grew up in Mississippi." Brown recalled when he, Moses, and two other thirsty workers once stopped at a soda stand and its operator insisted on serving them on the backside. The native workers agreed, but "Bob insisted [to] get the sodas in front." The operator then uttered racial epithets, but Moses persisted until they got the drinks. "I just thought it was unnecessary and dangerous," Brown later reflected, but "we told the story with great relish and it added to Bob's reputation."<sup>95</sup>

Another such incident occurred on August 16, 1962. At midnight Sam Block called Moses in Cleveland from Greenwood's COFO-office, which was surrounded by a white mob accompanied by policemen with him, Luvaghn Brown, and Lawrence Guyot inside. After softly advising them that "it'd be a good idea to get outa there," Moses called John Doar and Burke Marshall at their Washington homes. Block then called again to say the police had left and that the whites were brandishing chains and guns. Unsure of "what we were supposed to do" but convinced that boldness gave him "some kind of immunity," Moses and Willie Peacock drove to Greenwood, arriving around 4 A.M. The office was empty—the three had escaped through the window and over the roof—and trashed, with all COFO-records missing. Moses turned on a fan and fell asleep on the couch. Convinced that its noise would get them killed, Peacock later wrote, he "just didn't understand what kind of guy this Bob Moses is, that could walk into a place where a lynch mob had just left [and] go to sleep, as if the situation was normal. So I guess I was learning."<sup>96</sup>

Such incidents contributed to what observers have called the "Bob Moses mystique." When asked whether it was enhanced in history, the majority of SNCC-veterans insist that it was real. "It was indescribable but apparent from first meeting him," stated Julian Bond. Moses intrigued many because he was the opposite of their expectations, Brown added: "I anticipated a fireball. Bob certainly was not that!" While his 'Director'-title did not give Moses any powers over others, his position as state coordinator enhanced his authority. Whether he wanted to or not, he was the *de facto* leader,<sup>97</sup> particularly since the group was small. All field workers were required to call Moses daily. Sam Block wrote him repeatedly during his first months in Greenwood to ask for advice or report events. Such reports were surprisingly

<sup>95</sup> Cagin and Dray, *We Are Not Afraid*, 179; Robert E. Wright, interview by John Britton, July 22, 1968, and Douglas MacArthur Cotton, interview by Robert Wright, August 5, 1968, transcripts, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University; Dorie Ladner, interview by author, Washington, DC, November 16, 2009; Luvaghn Brown, email interview by author, January 31, 2011; Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 291-292.

<sup>96</sup> Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 151; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 633-634; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 1, 53, 75-76; Willie (Wazir) Peacock, "Comments," Panel Discussion, Session 'From Student Activists to Field Organizers,' SNCC's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Reunion Conference, Shaw University, Raleigh, NC, April 15, 2010.

<sup>97</sup> Moreover, outsiders *did* respond to titles, as Stokely Carmichael observed: "By virtue of being 'district director' I was seen as having instant authority. People were disposed to like and trust you just because." They expected that titles equated certain powers. One worker whose subsistence pay had stopped complained that SNCC headquarters had no such authority: "If Bob Moses hired me, he should be the one to put me off the staff, because he is the Mississippi Project Director." (Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 385-361; Nick Hampton, Report, March 1963, Box 1, Folder 3, Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) Panola County Office Records, Wisconsin Historical Society)

detailed, including budget overviews for office supplies, meals, rent, and expenses like “[hiring] a fellow to help move furniture in office.” This again underscores that Moses was aware of the projects’ daily pragmatics and that he influenced them through his responses. When Hollis Watkins and Curtis Hayes complained about working too much at Vernon Dahmer’s sawmill, Moses made arrangements for them to move. He occasionally dealt with finances too. On July 11 Block wrote him that two locals wanted \$20 pay instead of \$10, so he “told them, that they had to see you” because “you told them to let you know if they needed any other expense money.” Moses proposed concrete strategies in letters to workers as well. On August 11 he advised Guyot to expand from Greenwood to neighboring rural areas. Small groups needed to go into different counties for a week to do “a scouting job,” then meet to “evaluate where we stand and...plan strategies.” Although he asked if Guyot had ideas of his own, he disclosed his long-term vision by suggesting that he travelled “from project to project...This will allow you a chance to meet students all across the state...for action projects in the future.” Moses served as the main ‘contact man’ for everyone who came to Mississippi, including federal officials and other organizations.<sup>98</sup>

John Lewis accordingly argued in 2009 that although “we preached...that we didn’t need leaders, [or] build up a personality...we did it in a way. We elected people head of a project, or Secretary, the Chair, the Field Directors.” Local workers like Luvaghn Brown likewise denied that “SNCC had an anti-leadership view. We clearly had people who were viewed as leaders and primary decision makers. While local field secretaries made decisions based on their environment, we filed reports to [SNCC headquarters] and worked with goals set by SNCC leaders.” Being director in *Mississippi* strengthened Moses’ position. Mary King added: “Mississippi represented the depths of depravity and hatred...This gave his words more echo, because the cost of poor decision making would bring the greatest reprisals to Mississippians, and he would necessarily absorb the greatest responsibility.” As such, his “quiet determination helped to embolden” other project directors.<sup>99</sup>

Even if Moses sees himself—or revisionist historians treat him—solely as a ‘facilitator,’ his organizing work accordingly went far beyond using one’s skills and power to facilitate local groups. His singular character, contacts, and vision proved decisive for the Mississippi movement’s direction. Revisionist historians’ emphasis on ‘facilitation’ of grassroots movements alone—implying that anyone could have done what Moses did—therefore cannot adequately explain how the 1960s civil rights movement generated social change. This became especially evident from the next phase in the Mississippi movement. Although Moses’ field experiments had formed the groundwork for a long-term, increasingly political vision of social change that he summarized to the VEP as “Negro control of [the black majority] rural counties in the Deep South,” events in the winter of 1962-1963 necessitated a transition in COFO’s introverted, slow organizing approach as whites increasingly replicated Ruleville’s violent means to stop the movement. As a result, Moses said, a “heavy curtain...dropped down on the state, making us invisible to the nation.”<sup>100</sup>

<sup>98</sup> Julian Bond, interview by author, Washington, DC, October 27, 2008; Luvaghn Brown, email interview by author, January 13, 2011; Sam Block to Bob Moses, letters, June 23, July 11, 22, 27, 1962, and Bob Moses to Lawrence Guyot, letter, August 11, 1962, Papers James Forman, Library of Congress; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, 15 February 1991, Taylor Branch Papers; Will Henry Jr., interview by Robert Wright, June 29, 1969, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University.

<sup>99</sup> John Lewis, interview by author, Washington DC, November 16; Luvaghn Brown, email interview by author, January 13, 2011; Mary King, email interview by author, December 8, 2009.

<sup>100</sup> Poletta, *Strategy and Identity in 1960’s Black Protest*, 115; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 61.

## 6. A National Problem

### 6.1. Moses' Presence Only Means Trouble

Between fall 1962 and September 1963, Moses' and Mississippi SNCC's 'spade work' evolved from a relatively introverted approach into one that involved the nation at large and forced the Kennedy administration into action. SNCC's inability to combat whites' violent response to the movement, and the federal government's failure to curb that violence propelled that shift in strategy. After September 1962, Moses noted, he and Dave Dennis "wrestled with life-and-death questions" that made "finding a way to deal with the still-increasing violence...the top of our concerns." This transition accordingly complicates movement historiography debates about the production of social change and the role of outside involvement in it.<sup>1</sup>

Ever since emancipation, Southern whites had wanted the nation to accept that its race relations were a local concern, a mentality that historians stressing the 'local people approach' ironically duplicate. Historian J. Mills Thornton argued in *Dividing Lines* that the movements in Montgomery, Selma, and Birmingham were more-or-less self-contained and the effect of outside leaders or organizations limited. Likewise Charles Payne stressed grassroots agency in Mississippi, notwithstanding increased national involvement in 1963-1964: "[M]inimal federal response was enough to have a real impact because of the maximum possible response from so many 'ordinary' people."<sup>2</sup>

Although valuable, overemphasizing this revisionist interpretation obscures the extent to which local and (inter)national events intertwined in Mississippi, and how fulltime civil rights workers effectively mediated between them. The Mississippi movement, after all, did not occur in a vacuum. "[T]he Negro knows from his radio and television what happened today all over the world," Medgar Evers for instance stated in May 1963, "[he knows] about the new free nations in Africa [and] that a Congo native can be a locomotive engineer, but in Jackson he cannot even drive a garbage truck." Video footage of 1962 meetings showed Mississippi blacks telling how "they stopped [police chief Laurie] Pritchett" in Albany and concluded: "We can walk the streets of Greenwood" too. Moreover, this revisionist interpretation underestimates Moses' determination to challenge the notion that the 'race issue' was a southern or local problem. An analysis of this transitional phase in Mississippi SNCC's daily work therefore underscores the significance and ingenuity of SNCC—and particularly Moses—in developing a national strategy that respected, rather than undermined local agency.<sup>3</sup>

SNCC-workers feelings of powerlessness in the face of white violence and repression, and their growing criticism of the federal government cannot be overstated. Telephone records and field reports from SNCC-workers show that in a typical week in Mississippi between 1962 and 1963 false arrests, burnings, beatings, and nightly shootings constituted common experiences. State sanctioned violence occurred with astounding regularity. When two firebombs for instance ripped Hartman Turnbow's farm in Mileston after his registration attempt, the sheriff simply arrested Turnbow, Moses, and three other SNCC-workers for arson, reasoning that the activists had attacked themselves to "work up sympathy" for COFO. In other instances law enforcement officers were the perpetrators themselves: in 1963 police for example beat black youth Milton Hancock for joining the Greenwood COFO-project and murdered black Willie Joe Lovett outside his home. They arrested 58 blacks in Itta Bena for 'breach of the peace' after they had asked for police protection when whites had smoke-bombed their voter registration meeting. Moses reported many of these incidents to the Justice Department. This sometimes had an effect—the

<sup>1</sup> Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 61.

<sup>2</sup> Thornton, *Dividing Lines*, 3; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 422, 424.

<sup>3</sup> John R. Salter, "Medgar Evers Speaks—May 1963," in *Freedom is a Constant Struggle*, ed. Erenrich, 36-37; *The Streets of Greenwood*, directed by Ed Emshwiller, Emschwiller Film, USA, 1962.

charges against Moses and the others in Milestone were dismissed with John Doar's help—but SNCC's massive appeals to the federal government generally solved little. In less spectacular cases Burke Marshall repeatedly informed SNCC-workers that there was not "sufficient information to enable the Department [to determine] whether a violation of a federal statute was involved."<sup>4</sup>

Dealing with such instances week after week, year after year, naturally upset SNCC-workers within Mississippi and outside. In July 1962 Georgia SNCC's Bill Hansen documented a maddening conversation with a Department official to discuss why it "has not done some of the things...we asked." The official mentioned "(1) insufficient Justice Department staff (2) lack of evidence (3) no reason for federal intervention." SNCC-workers explained "why his reasons were ridiculous," but he still "asked us not to go into Baker County" rather than going there himself to investigate their claims. In January 1963 an aggravated Charles Sherrod wired President Kennedy that if the Department would not protect them "our blood will be on your hands." A month before, a worried Julian Bond wrote Moses that "we're having trouble with our SW Ga. boys. They're all frustrated novelists and send us reports that [James] Forman says 'show a decided Proustian influence.' Sherrod is writing like a drunk Jack Kerouac & O'Neal & Chatfield write like drunk Sherrods."<sup>5</sup>

The Justice Department's actions in one locality, however, cannot be judged without looking at how it functioned nationwide. Two main problems hampered its effectiveness, John Doar argued in a 1997 *Florida Law Review*-article. First, in 1960 its Civil Rights Division was mandated to "proceed cautiously until the Supreme Court decided the extent of federal authority over voting." Second, it consisted of only fifteen lawyers (under President Kennedy four had been added), who dealt with *all* federal civil rights cases. The lawyers spent sixteen days a month in the field, but still "had to master everything" from "the back roads" to "the operations of county registrar's offices [and] the states' registration laws." The fact that Southern counties, historian David Garrow noted, often refused to hand over registration records despite federal law additionally lead to protracted delays in gathering evidence. Moreover, the sophisticated and ever-changing methods used by southern registrars to bar black applicants made the establishment of deliberate intent no easy matter. Only by "analyzing countless records in...Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana," Doar explained, could the Division penetrate the wall of legal resistance.<sup>6</sup>

SNCC-workers either were not aware of or dismissed such nuances. Alongside the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment, they charged, the 1957 and 1960 Civil Rights Acts prohibited voter intimidation, allowed for the prosecution of registrars, and forced registrars to preserve their records. In practice, however, these Acts demanded a time-consuming county-by-county, case-by-case approach against individual registrars. By late 1962 the Department had filed three lawsuits in Louisiana, three in Alabama, and seven in Mississippi. Most were stalled in court, leaving such registrars, like Greenwood's Martha Lamb and Hattiesburg's Theron Lynd, free to continue rejecting black applicants. SNCC charged that the Justice

<sup>4</sup> Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 781-782; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 106-107; Cobb, *The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity*, 242; Evers-Williams and Manning, eds., *The Autobiography of Medgar Evers*, 260; "SNCC Worker Beaten, Jailed," SNCC News Release, no date, private collection Joan Mulholland; Bob Moses, "On the Death of Willie Joe Lovett," memorandum, no date, File #0754, Reel 38, Series XV, State Project Files, "Shootings and Killings Since 1961," report, Files # 0771-0772, Reel 69, Appendix A: MFDP Papers, and Bob Moses to John Fisher, letter, July 26, 1963, File #0876, Reel 6, and Burke Marshall to Adam C. Powell, letter, March 31, 1964, File #0544, Reel 5, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 70-71; Henry and Curry, *Aaron Henry*, 142, 154. In the Lovett and Itta Bena cases, Moses also interviewed witnesses.

<sup>5</sup> William Hansen, "Albany and Southwest Georgia," field report, June 25-July 6, 1962, Albany City Archives, private collection Adam Fairclough (the meeting with the Department official (Jerry Heilbron) occurred on July 1); "S.W. Georgia Voter Program Continues Despite Legal Losses," *The Student Voice* IV, no.1, April 1963, in *The Student Voice*, ed. Carson, 66; Julian Bond to Bob Moses, letter, December 6, 1962, Box 2, Folder 9, Howard Zinn Papers.

<sup>6</sup> Doar, "The Work of the Civil Rights Division in Enforcing Voting Rights Under the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1960," 1-4, 6, 10-11; Doar and Landsberg, "The Performance of the FBI in Investigating Violations of Federal Laws Protecting the Right to Vote—1960-1967," 3, 5-6, 14-15; David J. Garrow, *Protest at Selma: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Voting Rights Act of 1965* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), 15-18.

Department could also use Reconstruction-era laws like the 1866 and 1875 Civil Rights Acts, as well as Title 18 of the U.S. Code, which made the intimidation of “any person in the employment of his constitutional rights” a criminal offense. But as Doar admitted in 2010, the federal government “refused to do more than [it had to].”<sup>7</sup>

After all, Moses explained to *The New American*, the administration’s policies were “subject to political situations.” The Kennedys’ refusal to allow U.S. Commission on Civil Rights hearings in Mississippi evidenced this. The Kennedys’ unwillingness to challenge the Dixiecrats’ power within their Democratic Party partly explains their reluctance, as does their (initial) misunderstanding of the southern racial system’s deep-seated nature. Moreover, lawsuits sometimes failed because of the federal judges President Kennedy had appointed to southern benches. Over a quarter were known segregationists. According to David Garrow at least 100 lawsuits were “rejected by men [the federal government itself] had chosen for the southern federal bench.” One of them even wrote an abusive letter to John Doar stating that he was “not favorably impressed with you...I spend most of my time in fooling with lousy cases brought before me by your department in the civil rights field, and I do not intend to turn my docket over to your department for your political advancement.”<sup>8</sup>

A recalcitrant FBI with its under-manned southern offices and its racist director, J. Edgar Hoover, further hampered the Civil Rights Division. Historian Kenneth O’Reilly has detailed the bureaucratic maneuvers Hoover used to thwart the Justice Department. While FBI-workers copied registration records and interviewed witnesses, Hoover’s reluctance to pursue such cases meant that they left the lengthy analyses of voting rolls and interviews to the overextended Justice Department. Moreover, Hoover refused to allow FBI agents to arrest whites for interfering with blacks’ constitutional rights. This often meant that agents merely “stood, watched, and took notes” when whites assaulted civil rights workers. Robert Kennedy and Burke Marshall supported this no-arrest policy for fear that southern congressional Democrats would block “even the administration’s modest civil rights initiatives.” Hoover, O’Reilly concluded, succeeded in “depriving black people of a resource that could have been an effective weapon in their struggle.”<sup>9</sup>

Officials like Burke Marshall certainly understood why the situation frustrated SNCC-workers: “[T]he federal government had enormous power[:] an army, a navy, an air force,” so not using that power in life-and-death circumstances “was incomprehensible. It was lawyers’ piddling talk.” Moreover, movement workers diligently cooperated with the Department. Despite their skepticism of the NAACP’s stress on legalism, SNCC assiduously collected evidence and bombarded the Justice Department with petitions, interviews, and reports. Procuring and furnishing such evidence was a vital part of SNCC’s work, Moses insisted. He encouraged COFO-workers to buy five copies of newspapers that printed black applicants’ names: “clip them and send them all in” because “[n]obody is recording this information but you.” Moses

<sup>7</sup> Doar and Landsberg, “The Performance of the FBI in Investigating Violations of Federal Laws Protecting the Right to Vote—1960-1967,” 3, 5-6, 14-15; Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 41; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 47-49; Robert Moses, et al. versus Robert F. Kennedy and J. Edgar Hoover, lawsuit, January 1963, Files #0649-0668, Reel 23, Series VIII, Research Department, Court Cases, SNCC Papers; “Federal Inaction Challenged,” *The Student Voice*, September 23, 1964, in *The Student Voice*, ed. Carson, 193; John Doar, conversation with author, Raleigh, NC, April 14, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> “Voter Registration Drive Moves Forward Painfully,” *The New American*, February 6, 1963; Hammerback and Jensen, “Calling Washington Collect,” in *Civil Rights Rhetoric and the American Presidency*, eds. Aune and Rigsby, 146-147; Dittmer, *Local People*, 194-198; King, *Freedom Song*, 292-297; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 48; Carson, *In Struggle*, 85-86; Judge Harold Cox to John Doar, letter, in Doar, “The Work of the Civil Rights Division in Enforcing Voting Rights Under the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1960,” 10-11; Garrow, *Protest at Selma*, 22-24. Moses therefore later complained: “Somebody ought to do a serious study of Kennedy’s appointment of judges...One district judge can do away with two years’ work.” (O’Reilly, “Racial Matters,” 76-77)

<sup>9</sup> O’Reilly, “Racial Matters,” 49-77; Doar and Landsberg, “The Performance of the FBI in Investigating Violations of Federal Laws Protecting the Right to Vote—1960-1967,” 59-61.

even arranged with John Doar that Tim Jenkins could spend several days in Washington to research “voting and other cases...invaluable to SNCC.” Clearly, relations between SNCC and the Department were closer than historians generally depict.<sup>10</sup>

SNCC-workers’ views of the Department depended on their individual experiences with it. Moses was more positive about it than Charles Sherrod, perhaps because Moses mostly dealt with John Doar. A liberal Republican, Doar sympathized with the movement and Moses repeatedly witnessed his positive effect on black Mississippians. Although he termed their rapport “a working relationship,” the two men became personally close. Moses also got on well with Burke Marshall. The former’s analytical and consensus-building character helped in this. In 1984 he said he always tried “to understand what the process was...because it was there that you [had] to work out what it was that you should do.” He therefore avoided criticism and “concentrated more on developing a working relationship with them to get whatever help we could.” Moreover, he “didn’t...get worked up about what the Justice Department couldn’t do, because it was clear from the beginning that we were operating in a very tight political situation.”<sup>11</sup>

Pushing the Justice Department constituted a valuable aspect of Moses’ organizing in 1962, but he did not yet consider this part of a deliberate outreach to the nation yet; the latter was merely a side-effect of his emphasis on grassroots leadership. He first began to think more strategically after James Meredith’s integration of ‘Ole Miss,’ the University of Mississippi in Oxford, in September 1962. In a repeat of the 1957 Little Rock crisis, local whites, egged on by Governor Ross Barnett, barred Meredith from admission. The Kennedys tried to avoid deploying troops, having failed to learn from Little Rock that segregationist politicians’ promises to ensure order could not be trusted. This proved a fatal mistake: when riots erupted on and off campus, state troops withdrew and federal troops had to restore order. One journalist and one resident were killed and 160 marshals injured before Meredith entered his first class under military protection on October 1.<sup>12</sup>

Moses did not at first see this crisis as a reason to alter his slow organizing methods. He merely noted at the time that the Justice Department “[is] experimenting in this area, just as we are.” For him the significance of ‘Ole Miss’ was rather the realization that the political and public debate centered around the wrong premise—federal versus state power—instead of the more important principle that “being a citizen... was not just a formality, there was substance to it.” “The country never...made the connection,” he reflected in 2011, “between the armed struggle Mississippi terrorists waged at Ole Miss[,] the endemic Mississippi Delta sharecropper illiteracy, and the national lack of intentionality to provide a quality education for all its children.” Meredith’s fight and his fight were in fact identical: “SNCC and illiterate sharecroppers who [entered] into a ‘registration to vote’ procedure...made their moves from the same fundamental place as Meredith.” Although Meredith’s attempt had ensured federal involvement, SNCC should therefore just continue what it was doing: bringing the question of the meaning of citizenship to a head by accompanying illiterate blacks to the registrar.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> O’Reilly, *Racial Matters*, 64-65; Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 41; Charles Sherrod to FBI, field report, January 29, 1962, Files #0357–0358, Reel 6, and Bob Moses to Hermann Rottenberg, letter, no date, File #1219, Reel 8, and Bob Moses to “Workers in the Voter Education Project,” letter, no date (approximately August 1962), File #1010, Reel 10, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, July 30, 1984, Taylor Branch Papers; Bob Moses to the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department, letter, July 6, 1962, and Bob Moses to Tim Jenkins, letter, February 24, 1963, James Forman Papers, Library of Congress; Robert Parris Moses, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 15, 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Carson, *In Struggle*, 85; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, July 30, 1984, and Robert Parris Moses, interview by Joe Sinsheimer, December 5, 1984, Box 108, Folder 1, Taylor Branch Papers.

<sup>12</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 138-142; Woods, *Black Struggle, Red Scare*, 52, 154-155. For full details of the events at Ole Miss, see Charles Eagles, *The Price of Defiance: James Meredith and the Integration of Ole Miss* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> Moses, “Report to Voter Education Project of the Southern Regional Council,” no date (likely December 1962), private collection Joan Mulholland; Robert Parris Moses, email interview by author, May 2, 2011.



Yet Southern whites' adamant resistance in the riots' wake made this impossible. Convinced that state politicians could not prevent another federal "invasion," an increasing number felt they had to ensure the status quo themselves. "Murderous tension," Moses recalled, "thickened the air." After the Ole Miss confrontation violent reprisals against COFO intensified. Its "voting drives...proceeded by steepes instead of slopes," he wrote a Northern support group, "we have been on a deep plateau all winter, shaking off the effects of the violence of August and September." Black Mississippians celebrated Meredith's acceptance, but remained wary of movement involvement. "Many Mississippi and South Georgia citizens will not make further efforts to register," Moses wrote, "[T]hey feel that their last hope, the federal government, has forsaken them."<sup>14</sup>

The new surge in violence and intimidation forced Moses to recognize, as he informed the VEP, that "we are powerless to register people in significant numbers...until the power of the Citizens Council over state politics is broken, the [Justice Department] secures for Negroes across the board the right to register, or Negroes rise up en masse with an unsophisticated blatant demand for immediate registration." It was "clear by now" that case-by-case lawsuits "will not do the job." The only solution was the stationing of federal Marshalls at the courthouse,<sup>15</sup> and filing "a broad suit to stop economic reprisals and physical violence to prospective registrants[,] abolish the poll tax [and] literacy test."<sup>16</sup>

Moses felt more strongly than ever that the Justice Department should act more aggressively, but prioritizing the promotion of grassroots agency, he did not make pushing for this a cornerstone of his daily work yet. Several historians, however, have cited the January 1963 lawsuit *Moses v. Robert Kennedy and J. Edgar Hoover* as evidence of a "move toward more assertive action...to garner national publicity and participation." The fact that 'radical' white lawyers William Higgs, William Kunstler, and Arthur Kinoy filed the suit seems to confirm this. The suit challenged the two officials based on six sections of the federal code obliging officials to "protect plaintiffs and their class from deprivation of their constitutional rights" by investigating, arresting, and prosecuting offenders acting individually, collectively, or in concert with local authorities. It was not the kind of lawsuit that the moderate NAACP would have filed. Moses hoped it would "establish a precedent" that indicated to Kennedy and Hoover that "their powers are immeasurably greater than they probably realized." But he added that it did "not reflect any antipathy toward the defendants or any lack of appreciation of the [Division's] two-year record."<sup>17</sup>

In 2010 Moses denied having had much to do with the suit. It was not, as historian Taylor Branch claimed, a "wild gamble" brought on by "desperation." It was "filed in my name," Moses explained, "but I'm not involved in really thinking through this; it's the lawyers. They have ideas about how to attack this." Other judicial experts, like the Gandhi Society's Harry Wachtel and American Civil Liberties Union director John Pemberton, appeared more engaged in the enterprise too. As such, Moses argued, "it would be a mistake to think of those lawsuits as part of a period when there's a consciousness about trying to think [in SNCC about] how we are going to address the nation." Nor was he naïve about the suit's probable outcome. As expected, Department officials blocked it, arguing, as Burke Marshall wrote

<sup>14</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 138-142; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 153; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 58-59; "Bob Kennedy, Hoover Sued," in Ann Arbor Friends of SNCC Bulletin, no date (likely January 1963), File #1191, Reel 7, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman SNCC Papers; Bob Moses, "Report to Voter Education Project of the Southern Regional Council," no date (likely December 1962), private collection Joan Mulholland.

<sup>15</sup> The Justice Department, however, Moses told *The New American*, refused this when asked. ("Voter Registration Drive Moves Forward Painfully," *The New American*, February 6, 1963)

<sup>16</sup> "Bob Kennedy, Hoover Sued," in Ann Arbor Friends of SNCC Bulletin, no date (likely January 1963), File #1191, Reel 7, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers; Moses, "Report to Voter Education Project of the Southern Regional Council," no date (likely December 1962), private collection Joan Mulholland.

<sup>17</sup> Carson, *In Struggle*, 86; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 89-90; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 712-713; *Robert Moses, et al. versus Robert F. Kennedy and J. Edgar Hoover*, lawsuit, January 1963, Files #0649-0668, Reel 23, Series VIII, Research Department, Court Cases, SNCC Papers.

Pemberton, that “preservation of law and order...is the responsibility of local authorities” and that the Department should only sue if a conviction seemed likely.<sup>18</sup>

Events in Greenwood in the 1962-1963 winter then showed that building grassroots leadership and forging an alliance between North and South were not mutually exclusive goals. Black Mississippi native Sam Block started the project in mid-1962, although the “intensity of the hatred and cruelty exhibited by Greenwood whites,” as one historian argued, were “shocking even by the standards of Mississippi.” As police commissioner Buff Hammond verbalized local sentiment: “[D]esegregation just won’t happen until the Federal Government beats us to our knees.” In 1960 fewer than 2% of blacks, who comprised 64.6% of Leflore County’s population, were registered to vote compared to 95% of whites. According to historian Charles Payne, a tradition of black resistance existed, particularly among financially independent families like the McGhees. Yet few, especially among the working-class poor, were willing to join their open defiance. “They think of Silas and Laura McGhee,” one SNCC-worker later observed, as “courageous but a little crazy.”<sup>19</sup>

When Moses drove Sam Block to Greenwood on June 18, the latter started his project alone and penniless. Within two months he had recruited local canvassers and arranged space for citizenship classes. But after several organized courthouse trips, white opposition surged. The White Citizens Council forced blacks to evict Block, and the police, he complained to *The New York Times*, “threatened to knock my teeth out.” Harassment increased when Block filed a police brutality charge for the beating of a falsely arrested black youth. When whites beat him savagely on August 13, he asked Moses for temporary reinforcements in the persons of Lawrence Guyot and Luvaghn Brown. Three days later, the three had their legendary rooftop escape from a white mob. The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission started investigating the “strange” Block, but was even more fearful of Moses. “Moses’ presence,” it predicted, “can only mean trouble.” To show locals, now thoroughly intimidated, that SNCC would not leave them, Willie Peacock joined Block full-time. Eventually the group managed to tie a small group of locals, including NAACP-leader Dewey Greene, to the project. Block felt so confident about its viability he asked Moses if he could study in Houston for a few weeks because “Dewey and the rest...can take care of things.” Moses therefore contemplated making Greenwood—instead of Jackson—SNCC’s state headquarters.<sup>20</sup>

Amplified white opposition following the ‘Ole Miss’ riots then led to a new phase in the Greenwood project, making it the first COFO-program to gain national fame. In October Leflore and Sunflower County officials voted to stop their surplus commodities programs, which provided food and clothing to 5,000 welfare recipients throughout the year and 22,000 others during winter. Because over 90 percent of recipients were black, many viewed the cut-off as retribution for COFO. Leflore officials maintained the reasons were financial; the *Jackson Daily News* celebrated the ending of recipients’ “greed, fraud, [and]

<sup>18</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 15, 2010; Bob Moses to William L. Higgs, letter, December 4, 1962, James Forman Papers, Library of Congress; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 712-713; John de J. Pemberton to Robert F. Kennedy and Burke Marshall, letters, February 25 and March 28, 1963, and Marshall to Pemberton, March 13, 1963, Files #0489, Reel 4, Burke Marshall Records, Records of the Department of Justice’s Civil Rights Division, 1958-1973, Microfilm, The Civil Rights Movement and the Federal Government Collection, Roosevelt Study Center, Middelburg, the Netherlands.

<sup>19</sup> Cobb, *The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity*, 237, 239; Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 133-134, 144; Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*, 83-84; Mike Miller, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 15, 2010; Constancia Romilly, “Report on Leflore County,” no date, Files #0700-0702, Reel 8, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers. Laura McGhee was the sister of murdered NAACP-leader Gus Courts.

<sup>20</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 128-135; Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 141-153; “Mississippi Negro Alleges A Beating,” *New York Times*, August 16, 1963; James A. Wechsler, “Combat Story,” *New York Post*, March 19, 1963; Tom Scarbrough, “Leflore County—Samuel Block and Robert Moses” and “Leflore County—Further Investigation on Samuel Block and Robert Moses,” investigative reports, August 14 and September 12, 1962, Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission Online, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, MS, [http://mdah.state.ms.us/arrec/digital\\_archives/sovcom/](http://mdah.state.ms.us/arrec/digital_archives/sovcom/) (accessed November 22, 2007); Sam Block to Bob Moses, letter, July 27, 1962, James Forman Papers, Library of Congress.

fakery.” The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights investigators urged the federal government to “provide for direct Federal distribution of surplus food,” but the latter responded slowly. COFO-workers recorded witnessing widespread poverty, including children without milk, shoes, or even clothes. In some houses, they wrote, “you can look at the ground through the floor.” Moses documented that the situation was particularly bad in areas where “a lack of rain...shortened the crop,” because plantation owners could harvest most of it with machines, thereby depriving their workers of an income. “Commodities are the only way many Negroes make it from cotton season to cotton season,” Charles McLaurin and Charlie Cobb claimed in November, “If this is taken away...they have nothing at all.”<sup>21</sup>

The cut-off affected Moses deeply. He described to SNCC’s Martha Prescott how a black man’s “silent hand reached over from behind” once when he was reading after finishing a bowl of stew, and then took a neckbone and potatoes he had discarded. He poignantly asked her: “What the hell are you going to do when a man has to pick up a left-over potato from a bowl of stew?” When Wiley Branton confronted Moses about having spent VEP-money on food for locals, he replied: “[W]hat can you do when you’re faced with all those people standing in [relief] line[s]?” The answer, he realized, lay in outside support. If Mississippi would not provide for its black citizens, then COFO would with a commodity drive of its own.<sup>22</sup>

In distributing commodities COFO and SNCC increased their stature, both locally and nationally. The drive quickly involved activists nationwide. In October Moses solicited the Northern Student Movement’s Peter Countryman for money, food, and clothes, and a month later to help with cars and mimeograph machines. He appealed for volunteers as well: anyone with “stamina and some skills, writing, preaching, singing, playing a guitar, would be good.” He felt excited that “the struggle in the South rebounds into the North to bring new forces to play in that situation up there.” The cut-off, he realized, provided a unique opportunity for bridging the local *and* national movement.<sup>23</sup>

The appeal brought a gratifying support. Friends of SNCC-groups (FOS) and individual activists, organizations, and institutions, including churches and colleges, responded enthusiastically. Black Michigan State SNCC-students Ivanhoe Donaldson and Benjamin Taylor drove trucks loaded with commodities from Detroit to the Delta twelve times<sup>24</sup>. Moses asked Mike Miller of the Bay Area FOS to help organize “ministers and interested citizens into a ‘Committee to Aid Mississippi.’” Chicago FOS sent three shipments, totaling 79,000 pounds of food. By February COFO could distribute 400-600 boxes within a day. Harry Belafonte and black comedian Dick Gregory provided additional help. Gregory flew 14,000 pounds of commodities from Chicago and helped distribute them—a dramatic picture the national media swooned over. Gregory inspired locals by teasing policemen. “Before long,” Moses stated, “everyone had a favorite Dick Gregory line.” James Forman later wrote Gregory that his presence “really increased our determination to stay in Mississippi.” It also unsettled whites. The *Jackson Daily News* chastised Gregory’s “cheap publicity stunt,” and Governor Ross Barnett publicly condemned Northern media’s gullibility in believing Gregory.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 143-145; Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 158-159; James M. Ward, “For Leflore: Alms or Arms,” in *The Jackson Daily News*, March 21, 1963; Charles McLaurin and Charles Cobb, “Preliminary Survey on the Condition of the Negro Farmers in Ruleville, Mississippi, at the Close of the Cotton Season,” memorandum, November 19, 1962, File #0136, Reel 38, Series XV, State Projects Files, SNCC Papers; Bob Moses to Peter Countryman, November 7, 1962, James Forman Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>22</sup> Bob Moses and Charles Cobb, memorandum, December 21, 1962, and Bob Moses to Martha Prescott, letter, James Forman Papers, Library of Congress; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 93.

<sup>23</sup> Peter Countryman to Bob Moses, letter, October 29, 1962, and Moses to Countryman, November 7, 1962, James Forman Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>24</sup> In Clarksdale, however, they were jailed for transporting “narcotics”—they carried aspirin and vitamins.

<sup>25</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 145-146; Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 158-160; Bob Moses to Mike Miller, letter, March 20, 1963, File #0934, Reel 7, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 63-64; Dick Gregory and Robert Lipsyte, *Nigger—An Autobiography* (New York: Pocket Books, 2006), 161; James M. Ward, “Another Cheap Publicity Stunt” and “Ross Says ‘Race Agitators’ Could Halt Food Program,” *Jackson Daily News*, February 6, 16, and 15, 1963; Wallace Terry, “Gregory Can’t Avoid The Issue,” newspaper unknown, April 4, 1963, private collection Joan Mulholland.

Mississippi whites clearly miscalculated the effect of the cut-off. SNCC had recognized what the opportunity offered and ingeniously exploited it to their and locals' benefit: by providing direct aid COFO effectively set up a parallel welfare system, which it creatively turned into an unprecedented organizing tool. Unlike earlier direct aid campaigns by the NAACP and others, SNCC's drive, which expanded to neighboring Delta counties, was consciously designed to organize the rural working class. "[W]hen a thousand people stand in line for a few cans of food," Moses wrote Chicago FOS, "then it is possible to tell a thousand people...they are trapped in poverty, that *they* must move if they are to escape." Before distributing commodities COFO-workers demonstrated how to fill in voter registration forms. Subsequently, Moses said, food became "identified in the minds of everyone as food for those who want to be free, and the minimum requirement for freedom is identified as registration to vote."<sup>26</sup>

While most blacks knew that the cut-off was retribution for COFO, few blamed it. As Charles Payne noted, the cut-off arbitrarily affected movement participants *and* those that had shunned it. With nothing left, they might as well continue or start involvement. Since local nor federal authorities provided alternatives, COFO represented their life line. This, Moses observed, changed SNCC's reputation, giving it "an image in the Negro community of providing direct aid, not just 'agitation.'" Nonetheless many middle-class blacks, largely unaffected by the cut-off, were reluctant to help. Most ministers refused involvement or usage of their churches as distribution centers, leaving Moses to complain repetitively that "the lack of real cooperation from ministers is still the biggest single problem facing the local movement."<sup>27</sup>

Distributing commodities was no easy matter. First, the demand was always larger than the supply. Reaching only 1,000 needy people, Moses wrote Mike Miller, "we have not yet scratched the surface in alleviating the problem. Even now there are thousands of people waiting." Second, distinguishing the more deserving from the less deserving was problematic. Eventually the staff agreed that movement participants should receive commodities first and that left-overs should be distributed on a 'first-come, first served' basis. Some argued that recipients should be required to apply to register to vote. Having been told by the SNCC-office "to handle [distribution] as she saw best," Fannie Lou Hamer often refused commodities "till all the cars come back from [the] Indianola [courthouse]." This raised the question of manipulation. Charlie Cobb reported in February 1964 that Moses had mentioned that Ruleville blacks "were told they should go to the courthouse...to get food," implying Moses knew of the practice and condoned it. In another instance Miller asked Moses what to do about a minister who distributed commodities independently from COFO: "(a) discipline him—get him to send the stuff to COFO, or (b) isolate him" by letting "the community know that helping [him] is not the best way to help the movement." He proposed that Moses, Aaron Henry, or Martin Luther King should write the minister and ask him to align with COFO. "Bob will try and get Aaron Henry to write a letter," another SNCC-worker replied. Such incidents indicate how thin the line was between welcoming grassroots initiatives and having them conform to SNCC's organizational preferences.<sup>28</sup>

Most locals, however, did not feel pressured to join the movement in exchange for food. Their participation represented something larger, Moses observed: "[Whites] could say people were hungry but they couldn't say they were apathetic [to civil rights] if for a little bit of food they were willing to risk everything." This became particularly clear when arsonists torched four black businesses near the SNCC-

<sup>26</sup> Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 59-60; Carson, *In Struggle*, 80. Such identification occurred unintentionally too: locals who helped in distribution centers but were not interested in civil rights per se automatically learned about COFO's programs and stayed to help with these.

<sup>27</sup> Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 158-160; Dittmer, *Local People*, 146; Carson, *In Struggle*, 80; Cagin and Dray, *We Are Not Afraid*, 190; Poletta, *Strategy and Identity in 1960's Black Protest*, 141.

<sup>28</sup> Mike Miller to Bob Moses and Charles McDew, letter, March 16, 1963, and Miller to Moses, letter, March 17, 1963, File #0938, and Anonymous SNCC-worker to Mike Miller, letter, March 20, 1963, File #0934, Reel 7, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, and Charlie Cobb, transcript telephone report, February 18, 1964, File #0702, Reel 38, Series XV, State Project Files, SNCC Papers; King, *Freedom Song*, 144; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 158-160; Dittmer, *Local People*, 146; SNCC Papers; Mike Miller, interview by author, April 15, 2010; Lee, *For Freedom's Sake*, 64-65.

office on February 20. Because the evening before an anonymous call had warned that the SNCC-office would “be taken care of,” Sam Block believed that the businesses were burned by mistake. When local newspapers published his comments he was arrested for “public utterances designed to incite breach of peace.” Several hundred blacks then packed the courtroom or waited outside when Block went on trial on February 24. Most came from nearby plantations or were unemployed town dwellers. They “really had their chests stuck out,” Willie Peacock recalled, “They came to get Sam out.” “Even we were surprised by their militancy,” Moses agreed, “Some were drinking from ‘white’ water fountains in the courthouse. Others—plantation workers—were actually talking back to plantation owners, perhaps inspired by Sam.” The judge offered Block a suspended sentence if he left town. Block refused and received a 6-month sentence and a \$500 fine, but was released on bail. Blacks celebrated this as “a personal victory.” That afternoon they tried en masse to register, and then attended the largest civil rights meetings Greenwood had ever witnessed. “Suddenly,” Moses concluded, “Greenwood had a mass movement.”<sup>29</sup>

The massive support for Block, unseen at prior arrests of civil rights leaders apart from Martin Luther King’s in Albany, indicated the success of SNCC’s slow organizing through direct, unyielding commitment to civil rights on a daily basis. Block had spent eight months building relationships. Few openly followed him, but a silent majority had learned to respect him as they waited to feel comfortable enough to show it. “For many people in Mississippi,” historian Charles Payne therefore observed, “attachment to the movement meant attachment to the particular individuals who represented it rather than to particular organizations or political strategies.” Moreover, the cut-off demonstrated SNCC’s genius in directing its aid drive toward the rural poor. This, Moses believed, explained why so many locals stood with SNCC but had shunned earlier activists. “Mississippi Negroes do not deal in abstracts” like “the national implications [of] disfranchisement,” Charlie Cobb reported, but “in local realities” like unemployment or starvation.<sup>30</sup>

Moses was thrilled. He wrote Chicago FOS he had often doubted whether his sacrifices would be worth the gains, wondering if “maybe you did come only to boil and bubble and then burst, out of sight and sound.” Now their rewards were visible: “This is a new dimension... Negroes have never stood en masse in protest at the seat of power in the iceberg of Mississippi politics.” Illiterate blacks “stood in line to tell the registrar they still wanted to vote, that they didn’t have the chance to go to school when they were small—and anyway Mr. John Jones can’t read and write either and *he* votes...” But, he worried, “Who knows what’s to come next?”<sup>31</sup>

## 6.2. Sold Out in Greenwood

Four days later Moses knew the answer—twelve hours after President Kennedy spoke promisingly about voting rights. On February 28 Moses invited Tougaloo student and Freedom Rider Jimmy Travis and VEP field director Randolph Blackwell to Greenwood. An untagged Buick with three whites inside parked outside the SNCC-office all afternoon and evening. By nine Moses suggested that the workers not staged in Greenwood should return home, and that he, Blackwell, and Travis drove to Amzie Moore’s house as planned. To test the whites’ reaction, one worker drove around the office; as expected, the Buick followed him. Willie Peacock therefore argued that nobody should leave, but Moses proposed that they break up in groups to minimize the danger. He, Travis, and Blackwell took a back road to reach the highway. When

<sup>29</sup> Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 62; Dittmer, *Local People*, 146-147; Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 161-162; News Release “Four Buildings Burned Near Greenwood, Miss. Office,” no date, File #0943, Reel 13, Series VII, Communications Department, Public Relations, SNCC Papers; “SNCC Staff Jailed as Greenwood Negroes Register in ‘First Breakthrough’ in Miss,” *The Student Voice* IV, no. 1, April 1963, in *The Student Voice*, ed. Carson, 65, 68.

<sup>30</sup> Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 176, 238; Charles Cobb, “Re: Greenville, Mississippi,” Field Report, November 8, 1963, Files #0964–0969, Reel 5, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers.

<sup>31</sup> Murphree, *The Selling of Civil Rights*, 49-50; Moses to Chicago FOS, letter, February 24, 1963, in Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*, 88-89 and in Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 59-60.

they stopped for fuel, the Buick circled the gas station. For Blackwell the experience was new and nerve-racking. “I don’t know how these kids are able to stand up to the strain,” he later commented, “it seems like being in combat, where you move through the town expecting anything to happen.” The other two had been in similar situations before—SNCC-workers told legendary tales of Moses’ ability to fall asleep during car chases—but now, Blackwell told the *Chicago-Sun Times*, they “knew they would be attacked. The only question was when.”<sup>32</sup>

Dimming the lights, Travis returned to the highway. When the traffic thinned out, the whites drove next to them and opened fire with a submachine gun. “Glass was splattering everywhere,” Moses related afterwards. “Jimmy shouted that he was hit, slumped down into my lap...and we went off the road. I grabbed at the wheel and stepped on the brakes.” Thirteen bullets were later recovered from the car. Miraculously only Travis was hit, in the neck and shoulder. Doctors at the Greenwood hospital told them that the bullet in his neck was lodged behind his spine, close to a vital brain area. Had the window not slowed its impact, he would have died instantly. Travis nonetheless refused an operation because, he later testified to Congress, “I thought [the white doctors] wouldn’t do the best they could.” He was transported to the hospital at Jackson’s State University the next morning.<sup>33</sup>

Moses was torn over the shooting. He believed that the bullets had been intended for him; he had been number one on the KKK’s assassination list since McComb. It also worried him that two of the perpetrators turned out to be well-known businessmen. If the shooters were “respectable[,] rational people” instead of “white trash,” he asked a reporter, “how do you accept [and] deal with that?” The incident similarly enraged others in the black community. Aaron Henry thundered in *The Delta Democrat-Times* that the perpetrators “must be hunted down.” He, Roy Wilkins, Dave Dennis, James Farmer, and Wiley Branton wired the Justice Department demanding “immediate action by the federal government.”<sup>34</sup>

The President’s Assistant Lee White’s reply initially seemed encouraging: “We are fully aware of the gravity of the present situation in Leflore [and] have every intention of carrying out our responsibility to protect the right to vote and those persons working to encourage the exercise of that right.” He promised FBI and local police investigations, aided by Justice Department personnel. This ensured the two businessmen’s arrest, but the FBI soon decided that the shooting was a local, not federal, concern and relinquished the case. The police released the two on bail and never charged anyone again. In November 1964 the district attorney, a former FBI-agent, formerly acquitted the two. Such incidents accordingly strengthened activists’ reluctance to cooperate with the FBI and southern police forces.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 162-163; Dittmer, *Local People*, 147-148; “How Nonviolent Warrior Feels on Firing Line in Rural Dixie,” *The Chicago-Sun Times*, May 20, 1963, Box 1, Folder 14, Howard Zinn Papers; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 294-295. For Moses’ legendary falling asleep while being chased stories, see Warren, *Who Speaks For the Negro?*, 403 and Leeman, *African-American Orators*, 264-265.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*; *The Story of Greenwood, Mississippi*, tape recording and transcript by Guy Carawan in 1962, Folkway Records, 1965; Washington Civil Rights Hearings, 1964, transcripts, Box 2, Folder 5, Howard Zinn Papers; Zinn, *The New Abolitionists*, 89-90. Moses had no money for the ambulance to bring Travis to Jackson, but a Greenwood black offered a \$60 check. Block went to cash it but the city bank—scratching the ‘Mr.’ before Block’s name—refused. The ambulance driver offered to countersign for Block, but it still refused. He then agreed to get the money later.

<sup>34</sup> Handwritten notes Taylor Branch, January 16, 1999, Box 108, Folder 1, Taylor Branch Papers; *The Streets of Greenwood*, directed by Ed Emshwiller, Emschwiller Film, USA, 1962; Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 40; “Two Shots Hit Voter Worker,” *The Delta Democrat-Times*, March 1, 1963, Box 2, Folder 3, Howard Zinn Papers; Lee C. White to Wiley Branton, Roy Wilkins, James Farmer, Michael Rosenbaum, letters, March 20 and 21, 1963, Reel 5, Part I, Files #00481 and #00487, Reel 5, Part 1, and White to “Friends,” letter, April 15, 1963, File #00052, and White to Branton, letter, March 20, 1963, File #00054, and White to Michael Rosenbaum, letter, March 22, #00474, Reel 8, Part I, and Wilkins to White, telegram, no date, Files #00485-00486, Reel 5, Part I, The White House Central Files, Civil Rights During the Kennedy Administration Collection, Papers of John F. Kennedy (hereafter cited as Papers John F. Kennedy), Microfilm, Roosevelt Study Center, Middelburg, the Netherlands.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 96-98; “SNCC Staff Jailed as Greenwood Negroes Register in ‘First Breakthrough’ in Miss,” *The Student Voice* IV, no. 1, April 1963, in *The Student Voice*, ed. Carson, 65, 68; Dittmer, *Local*



The shooting started the third phase of the project. Wiley Branton summoned activists nationwide to converge in Greenwood and initiate, in Moses' words, "a crash program to get as many Negroes as we could...to register." With the shooting, Branton wrote Governor Barnett, Leflore County had "elected itself the testing ground for democracy." Some fifty organizers answered the call. Most were SNCC-workers, but the NAACP sent Medgar Evers and Aaron Henry, CORE sent James Farmer and Dave Dennis, and SCLC Annelle Ponder and James Bevel. Branton alerted Robert Kennedy of the activists' influx "in advance so that you can provide...the necessary federal protection." In subsequent weeks John Doar repeatedly visited Greenwood, as did *New York Times* and other northern reporters. This escalation, the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* predicted, "could be as important a step in voter registration as the Freedom Rides were in interstate transportation."<sup>36</sup>

Although Moses felt ambivalent about the new tactic, he acknowledged that it "seemed to be the only way to answer this kind of violence." He recognized the importance of publicity, and asked Anne Braden to send "a release on Greenwood to the overseas press." Moreover, extra workers meant that more could be done in terms of voter registration. But Moses also feared long-term negative consequences for all COFO-projects. "SNCC-workers are reluctant to give up their projects in the other counties of Mississippi," he wrote Branton, "they are just beginning to crack the ice and to suspend [their] projects for 30 days or more would be detrimental." The Greenwood project might change too, endangering the effect of Block's earlier slow organizing. Yet precisely *because of* the preceding months of building relationships and distributing aid, the workers' influx bolstered rather than hampered local empowerment. "[T]his unprecedented concentration of resources in Leflore," Branton boasted in a VEP-newsletter, "has led to unprecedented results." Mass meetings were packed and 250 locals had attempted registration by March 21. Momentum gained despite—or because of—new violence, including the torching of the SNCC-office and nightriders' shooting of Dewey Greene's house. "We are not going to be chased out," Moses vowed defiantly in a SNCC-news letter, "Our program will continue."<sup>37</sup>

The attack on Dewey Greene, head of a beloved Greenwood family, triggered unprecedented black involvement. The next day 170 blacks gathered outside Wesley Chapel, SNCC's new office. James Forman suggested that they march to city hall to protest the shooting. Remembering the disruptive consequences of the march in McComb, Moses was not "too enthusiastic" about initiating direct action. As in McComb, however, he knew he had to follow locals' decisions. If they were to march, he argued, they should better march to the courthouse and try en masse to register. This kept the focus on voter registration and minimized the possibility of violence. They compromised on a march to the courthouse via city hall.<sup>38</sup>

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*People*, 150; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 163-164; "Charges Dropped Against Two Held in '63 Shooting of Rights Workers," SNCC News Release, November 29, 1964, File #0082, Reel 14, Series VII, Communications Department, Public Relations, SNCC Papers. The third white in the car was a minor.

<sup>36</sup> "Notes on Bob Moses," Box 1, Folder 14, Howard Zinn Papers; *The Story of Greenwood, Mississippi*, tape recording and transcript by Guy Carawan in 1962, Folkway Records, 1965; Dittmer, *Local People*, 148-149; "Travis Vows To Continue The Struggle," SNCC News Release, March 20, 1963, File #0972, Reel 13, Series VII, Communications Department, Public Relations, SNCC Papers; "Negroes Threaten 'Test' of Leflore," in *The Jackson Daily News*, March 2, 1963; Fred Powledge, "Negro's Shooting Spurs Voter Drive," *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, March 3, 1963.

<sup>37</sup> *The Story of Greenwood, Mississippi*, tape recording and transcript by Guy Carawan in 1962, Folkway Records, 1965; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 163, 165, 167-168; Anne Braden to James Forman, letter, March 10, 1963, File #0728, Reel 7, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, and "Moses Vows Program Will Continue Despite Fire in SNCC Greenwood Office," SNCC News Release, March 1963, File #0970, Reel 13, Series VII, Communications Department, Public Relations, SNCC Papers; Dittmer, *Local People*, 150-151; News Release VEP, No Title, March 31 1963, Box 1, Folder 14, Howard Zinn Papers.

<sup>38</sup> *The Story of Greenwood, Mississippi*, tape recording and transcript by Guy Carawan, Folkway Records, 1965; Dittmer, *Local People*, 151-157; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 170-174; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 719-725; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 99-103; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 296-304; Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*, 91-92; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, July 30, 1984, Taylor Branch Papers.

At city hall some dozen gun-toting officers awaited them with a German Shepherd. Mayor Charles Sampson warned the marchers to disperse or he would release the dog. This prospect terrified Moses who, not having grown up around them, had a dog phobia. SNCC-workers were therefore amazed to see Moses “refusing to move back, walking, walking towards the dog,” and asking to speak with the police chief. The incident enhanced Moses’ reputation of fearlessness. The police then charged into the crowd with sticks and unleashed the dog, which tore a gash in Moses’ pants and bit 20-year-old Greenwood black Matthew Hughes. The panicked group returned to the Chapel, where Moses, *Newsweek’s* Karl Fleming reported, proclaimed that “the dog is going to have to bite every Negro in Leflore County before we quit!” The outburst betrayed the anger of the normally self-composed Moses. The police arrived at the Chapel to arrest him and nine other SNCC-workers, including Willie Peacock, Lawrence Guyot, and James Forman. SNCC-workers Cleveland Banks and Forman’s wife Mildred managed to see Moses at the police station, who “told us to call several organizations and tell them what happened.”<sup>39</sup>

Pictures of the dog biting Hughes then spread across the nation. Reporters returned to Greenwood to witness a similar spectacle the next day, when forty blacks tried to register. On their way home 100 policemen and dogs lunged into them, although they were neither marching nor protesting. Local blacks were outraged. “I never thought,” sighed one, that “Greenwood peoples would treat Negroes that been around here, that nursed their children, cook for ‘em and farm this land, that they would put dogs on humans...I will never overcome it.” Mass meetings and citizenship classes were packed and middle-class blacks, including 31 ministers, now openly supported the movement. Moses estimated that local support reached 500-600 in April. The *Greenwood Commonwealth* dismissed these numbers: “When you can draw only 400 people out of a Negro population of 30,000, you aren’t stirring many folks up.” Moses thought otherwise: “[A]nyone looking deeper would have seen one key transformation. Black people had learned how to stand on their feet, look the white man in the eyes, and say this is what we demand.”<sup>40</sup>

For another week-and-a-half similar-sized groups went to the courthouse to register. Police kept meeting them, but with the national spotlight on Greenwood dogs were never used again. During some trips Dick Gregory rejoined them. To evade negative publicity, police avoided arresting him but his presence drew massive news coverage regardless. Local blacks were less fortunate; by April black detainees overflowed the city jail. Publicity soared when renowned civil rights leaders, including Martin Luther King, expressed support for Greenwood’s blacks. Mayor Sampson had to defend his town on the NBC’s *Today Show*. Southern journalists even investigated Moses’ conscientious objector-claim, but found to their dismay that the quotas were already being met “by calling men only between 19 and 26 years old.”<sup>41</sup>

While Moses and the other nine were in jail, Bob Cohen urged supporters to “send five dollars a week to Bob—to ease his way.” Moses’ father backed his son too: “Someone’s got to fight...I’m scared to death that Bob may die [but] I want him to stay there.” When the ten went on trial on March 29, 150 local blacks gathered outside. Curtis Hayes and Bobby Talbert were found innocent, but the others received 4 months imprisonment and \$200 fines for “disorderly conduct.” All eight refused bond, while SNCC urged its supporters to protest the sentences to federal and state authorities. One respondent was Moses’ New

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*; “Report on Voter Education in LeFlore County by Cleveland Banks,” Field Report, no date, File #00449, Reel 5, Part 4, Series I, Records of Andrew J. Young, Records SCLC.

<sup>40</sup> Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 172-173; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 65; *Greenwood Commonwealth* quoted in “U.S. Acts in Negro Vote Case,” *The Evening Star*, Washington D.C., March 30, 1963; Annell Ponder, Citizenship School Report, March 1963, File #00415, Reel 5, Part 4, Series I, Records of Andrew J. Young, Records SCLC.

<sup>41</sup> Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 172-173; “U.S. Court Denies Negro Voter Suit,” *New York Times*, April 2, 1963; Murray Illson, “Cruelty In South Is Laid To Police,” *New York Times*, April 7, 1963; James M. Ward, “An Incredible Coincidence and Headlines on Greenwood,” *The Jackson Daily News*, April 5, 1963; “Bob Moses Denied Objector Exemption,” newspaper unknown, April 3, 1963, private collection Joan Mulholland.

York friend Lawrence Benenson. Fearing lynchings, he wired the White House to “send Federal Marshalls immediately.”<sup>42</sup>

The time spent in jail resembled Moses’ confinement in Magnolia. The group passed time reading, playing chess, singing freedom songs, and educating each other. Focusing on what their imprisonment could achieve, Moses wrote an open letter, which the others signed and SNCC published. Unlike his “Letter from Magnolia jail,” it addressed the nation’s politicians, not a local audience. This shift in target underlined the Mississippi movement’s transitions after McComb. It asked them to enact legislation that provided federal protection for civil rights workers and voter registration applicants, including the presence of “federal referees in any county where 15% of any racial minority are not registered.” Without such action, the letter warned, there might be another “explosion such as occurred at Oxford, Mississippi” that would rock the country and cause “irreparable harm in her international affairs.” One recipient, California Congressman Augustus Hawkins, subsequently lauded SNCC’s “courageous defense of American democracy” in “the best tradition of our beloved country.”<sup>43</sup>

When John Doar visited the prisoners on April 3 Moses realized that the stir they caused in Greenwood had moved the administration more effectively than two years of collecting evidence and persuasion had. Doar told them that the FBI had sent in six agents and that Burke Marshall was negotiating with Greenwood officials. That afternoon President Kennedy, who faced increasing pressure from the Commission on Civil Rights and liberal congressmen, endorsed their case on television. He expressed the hope that a federal lawsuit “would find that there has been a denial of rights, which seems to me evident, but which the court must decide.” Three days earlier the Justice Department had indeed filed a lawsuit against the city of Greenwood. Representing the first head-on collision with segregationists about voting rights beyond suits against individual registrars, the government requested an injunction to end interference with registration efforts and allow blacks their constitutional right of peaceful assembly and protest. Local blacks, Charles McDew wrote, saw it as a sign “for a change, that the government is on their side.” News of the suit excited Moses too. When federal Marshalls transported the prisoners to the Greenville jail to testify at the injunction hearing the next day, all were jubilant. At night, Forman’s diary reads, Moses was “in rare form...standing behind the bars singing alone, talking about freedom.”<sup>44</sup>

The next morning all of a sudden the cell doors opened: the Justice Department had arranged their release. The eight left prison singing in front of dozen cameras, but their euphoria evaporated when they learned that John Doar had agreed to postpone the lawsuit and cancel the hearing. The city had arranged to reactivate the surplus food program if the federal government funded it, and to provide a bus to drive blacks to the courthouse to take the registration test. Whites recognized the deal as a victory because registrars could still disqualify blacks based on all the state’s legal requirements. The Greenwood movement was “so thoroughly undermined by the Kennedy administration’s concessions,” one historian stated, that “whites seemed fully confident they could handle any future challenge SNCC

<sup>42</sup> Bob Cohen to Judy Richardson, letter, no date, William Heath Papers; “Urgent,” memorandum, no date, and “Greenwood, Mississippi,” SNCC News Letter, April 1, 1963, File #0025, Reel 14, Series VII, Communications Department, Public Relations, SNCC Papers; “SNCC Staff Jailed as Greenwood Negroes Register in ‘First Breakthrough’ in Miss,” *The Student Voice* IV, no. 1, April 1963, in *The Student Voice*, ed. Carson, 65, 68; Lawrence Benenson and family to The President, telegram, March 28, 1963, Papers John F. Kennedy, Digital Archive John F. Kennedy Library, <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Research/Search-the-Digital-Archives.aspx> (accessed June 10, 2011).

<sup>43</sup> Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 299-303; “Jailed SNCC Staff Sends Open Letter,” News Release, April 3, 1963, File #1037, Series VII, Communications Department, Public Relations, and Augustus F. Hawkins to Bob Moses and to Dorothy Miller, April 5 and 10, 1963, File #0896, Reel 6, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers.

<sup>44</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 154-157; Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 173-174; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 721-725; Claude Sitton, “Mississippi Town Seizes 19 Negroes,” *New York Times*, April 4, 1963; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 303.

might muster.” Most harassment at the courthouse stopped, but by 1964 still fewer than fifty blacks had managed to register.<sup>45</sup>

Moses found the deal inexplicable. How could their release supersede establishing the constitutional rights of an entire people? John Doar sought out Moses, who gloomily withdrew in Greenwood’s streets, in an effort to explain. Political and legal reasons were plentiful: fear of alienating the southern voting bloc, more time needed to prepare the case, or the possibility that the suit would lose or be stalled in court (the hearing’s federal judge was a known “unscrupulous segregationist” who had already denied the Department’s request for an immediate court order). The most viable reason was fear that local officials, as in Oxford, would abdicate their duties and the federal government would have to ensure order by utilizing the army. Doar knew that all such explanations would sound hollow to Moses. When the latter greeted him with a desolate look, Doar kept his explanations to himself and simply said goodbye. After that, Doar recalled, “a barrier of formality” existed between them. Moses still believed years later that “We got sold out in Greenwood.”<sup>46</sup>

Greenwood proved a turning point for Moses and SNCC. Even SNCC-workers who had not been present internalized its main lesson: seeing the federal government as a partner was impossible, but raising a media spectacular could help bend its will. Events in Birmingham, Alabama, which displaced Greenwood from newspapers’ covers in April, reinforced the point. SCLC had joined Fred Shuttlesworth’s ACMHR in a citywide desegregation campaign that culminated in mass meetings, sit-ins, marches, and James Bevel’s brainchild, the children’s crusades. Police unleashed dogs and fire hoses on hundreds of children, who were then arrested. The unprecedented scenes shocked whites and blacks alike, leading to renewed negotiations with city officials. SCLC gained desegregation concessions which, however small and tentative, were celebrated as a breakthrough for the civil rights movement. More important, they helped persuade President Kennedy to introduce a strong Civil Rights Bill.<sup>47</sup>

Birmingham galvanized the movement everywhere. SNCC chairman John Lewis wrote that in Nashville “our ranks began growing immediately because of it.” Mississippi blacks responded likewise. According to Charlie Cobb, Birmingham “helped develop a new awareness of the scope of the civil rights movement in the mind of Mississippi Negroes.” At the same time, Birmingham exacerbated tensions between direct action-oriented groups like SNCC and the NAACP. In Greenville, Cobb reported, “white and Negro ‘leaders’ agreed that [mass protests]...must not be allowed to happen.” Middle-class blacks who benefitted from their relations with whites, Cobb charged, opposed any militant action that might jeopardize their position. This group thwarted COFO’s efforts by forming an adult Negro Citizens Group that agreed to stifle direct action and encouraged “class-conscious parents” to stop their children from attending COFO-meetings where they would be rubbing shoulders with “hoodlums from the pool halls.”<sup>48</sup>

Something similar occurred in Jackson. There too, Moses acknowledged on June 3, “Birmingham is directly responsible for what’s going on.” Since late 1962 Jackson’s NAACP Youth Council had been conducting a boycott against discriminating businesses. Seeing a boycott as too conservative and middle-class oriented, COFO-workers had been less than enthusiastic about the protest. Boycott leader John Salter even complained that Moses had done “everything he could do to pull our student activists into his projects.” When white leaders refused to negotiate, Medgar Evers vowed “to move Jackson,” as Moses

<sup>45</sup> Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 303; Cobb, *The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity*, 233; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 64-65.

<sup>46</sup> Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 724-725; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, July 30, 1984, Taylor Branch Papers; “U.S. Court Denies Negro Voter Suit,” in *New York Times*, April 2, 1963.

<sup>47</sup> Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 673-802. For more on the Birmingham story, see Diane McWorther, *Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama, The Climactic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution* (New York: Touchstone Books, 2001).

<sup>48</sup> Lewis and D’Orso, *Walking with the Wind*, 198; Charles Cobb, “Re: Greenville, Mississippi,” Field Report, November 8, 1963, Files #0964-0969, Reel 5, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers.

paraphrased him, “because if people up in Greenwood could get themselves together...then there was just no excuse for Jackson.” National NAACP refused all support until Birmingham. Fearing that SCLC might intervene, Roy Wilkins and Gloster Current arrived in Jackson to strengthen the boycott. Their appearance drew more conservative blacks into the boycott strategy committee, but the leadership remained divided over demonstrations. The original boycotters—evoking Birmingham too—called for direct action, but the conservatives opposed. When the students nonetheless launched sit-ins, Wilkins appeared supportive—especially when he got himself arrested. Behind the scenes, however, Wilkins and Current ensured the addition of more conservative blacks to the boycott committee to stop the costly and order-disturbing protests. They succeeded in the first week of June.<sup>49</sup>

Birmingham and Jackson underscored the methodological differences between SNCC, SCLC, and the NAACP more clearly than ever. According to historian John Dittmer, national NAACP-leaders came to Jackson believing that “they knew what was best for black Mississippians.” To SNCC the Jackson movement’s premature decline proved exactly why participatory democracy was the only effective approach to social change. Greenwood, where the movement continued as before when most outside activists had left by mid-April, showed that out-of-state forces could not undermine grassroots leadership if a town was united around a non-divisive strategy (voter registration) and organized along the lines of Moses’ slow McComb approach. After the 1961 failure of the Bevels, neither premise was realized in Jackson. SNCC also condemned the national NAACP’s timidity and criticized SCLC for its “hit and run” tactics, which stirred up media attention but left locals to the mercy of duplicitous white officials when the organization left town.<sup>50</sup>

During the spring and summer Moses contemplated the lessons of Greenwood, Birmingham, and Jackson. He had already noted in February that “[n]ational publicity, if correctly used and focused, is a powerful weapon in any move for change in Mississippi.” He now pondered marrying voter registration with mass direct action. At SNCC’s Easter Conference he praised the Greenwood events, but proclaimed that “what you need is not five hundred but five thousand going down [to register].” After all, “the country is in effect asking all white people in the Delta to do something which they don’t ask of any white people any place,” that is, allowing blacks to vote “where they are educationally inferior but yet outnumber [whites].” He did not “for one minute think that the country is in a position or is willing to push this down the throats of white people in the Delta.” Still, he added in a new militant tone, “it will have to be pushed down their throats because they are determined not to have it done.” Birmingham could be a catalyst for this. Mississippi’s “Negro community...before Birmingham was not ready to demonstrate en masse,” he repeated on June 3 before a War Resisters’ League sponsored forum in New York, “so we didn’t have sustained marches of people demanding to be registered immediately. Now, after Birmingham, it may be possible to launch this kind of thing—I’m not sure.”<sup>51</sup>

Moreover, Moses noticed that telling New Yorkers about Mississippi had become easier, he recounted a year later: “[T]hey couldn’t understand [but after] Birmingham, the problem had all of a sudden become a national problem.” The increased frequency and intensity of black protests underscored the idea that civil rights was a national issue: between spring and summer 930 demonstrations occurred in 115 cities in 11 southern states and in total 1963 counted 1,412 civil rights demonstrations nationwide.

<sup>49</sup> Bob Moses, “Speech,” (New York, June 3, 1963), transcript in *The Southern Patriot*, June 18, 1963, Box 108, Folder 3, Taylor Branch Papers); Dittmer, *Local People*, 157-169; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 70 (paraphrased from: Robert Parris Moses, interview by Blackside, Inc., May 19, 1986, for *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries; Ed King, “Bacchanal at Woolworth’s,” in *Freedom is a Constant Struggle*, ed. Erenrich, 27-35.

<sup>50</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 157, 169, 173-174; Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 174-175.

<sup>51</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 194; Bob Moses to John W. Blyth, Letter, February 24, 1963, File #1159, Reel 69, Appendix A: MFDP Papers (SNCC Papers); Bob Moses, “Speech” (SNCC Easter Conference 1963), transcript, Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 305-307; Bob Moses, “Speech,” (New York, June 3, 1963), transcript in *The Southern Patriot*, June 18, 1963, Box 108, Folder 3, Taylor Branch Papers).

SNCC conducted protests in Nashville, Greensboro, Atlanta, Knoxville, Cambridge (Maryland), and Danville (Virginia). The wave of protests influenced public opinion and intensified pressure on the Kennedys. It therefore seemed logical for Mississippi SNCC to consider a new, broader approach that fused grassroots leadership with a national movement to take advantage of the opportunity to command new federal civil rights legislation.<sup>52</sup>

The change in Moses' strategic thinking nonetheless occurred much more gradually than previous historians have allowed. "It's really the fall of '63," he stated in 2010, when catering to a national constituency became "a more conscious approach." Moreover, his statement about exploiting national publicity only "if correctly used and focused" determined his position throughout. Any approach reshaping the Mississippi movement's scope still had to be based on grassroots leadership. That is, get the national to work for the local rather than use the local to reach national goals; any outside appeal should be rooted in the needs of Mississippi blacks, not those of national organizations, the media, or politicians.<sup>53</sup>

For Moses this implied that Mississippi SNCC should expand, not abandon, its slow organizing approach. In fact, he believed in the latter's value even more strongly. Without it—as Greenwood and Jackson showed—no mass-based political thrust could be successful; blacks would be unwilling to respond. "[W]hat was true in McComb [became] even more evident in Greenwood," Moses reflected, "work with people and leadership will emerge. You don't have to know in advance who that leadership will be, but it will emerge from the movement that emerges." He therefore envisioned mass-based political action not as a Birmingham-like media spectacle, but as an intensified version of their past work: a Greenwood-like approach of slow organizing, with a staff of more than 100 SNCC-workers working in many towns and counties, leading "masses of people...demanding to be registered." If COFO could pressure the federal government to abolish the poll tax, outlaw literacy tests, and get federal referees at courthouse, he outlined on June 3, "there is a real possibility that in 1964 we can run a Negro for Congress and have a good chance of getting him elected."<sup>54</sup>

### 6.3. Mediation

Moses was not yet thinking about national involvement as a goal in itself. In 2010 he stated that he first began "thinking about a national picture" during mid-1962 meetings of the Taconic Foundation, but in mid-1963 he was still focused on problems specific to Mississippi. His activities between February and September 1963 support this claim. Yet they also display the importance of cosmopolitan activists for the Mississippi movement's direction and in fusing local blacks with a broader movement. This again raises the question of where 'facilitation' ends and 'induction' begins. As with any organizer, Moses' background influenced his daily decisions. He functioned not merely as a resource for local blacks to utilize but also as a teacher and guide.<sup>55</sup>

For example, Moses found that few local blacks saw the value of running for elective office. At a January 1963 SNCC Executive Committee meeting he noted that even the Mississippi staff was "skeptical of involvement in politics," fearing it might jeopardize relations with the non-partisan VEP. Yet he felt that the readiness of Greenwood's black poor to register illustrated the potential for reshaping discussions on the true meaning of citizenship. This meant that any 'national' strategy on federal voting legislation should focus on challenging literacy requirements. President Kennedy had proposed that Congress set

<sup>52</sup> Bob Moses, "Speech," (West Coast Civil Rights Conference, April 23, 1964), transcript, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, University of Southern Mississippi; Carson, *In Struggle*, 90-91; Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 302.

<sup>53</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 15, 2010.

<sup>54</sup> Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 65-66; Bob Moses, "Speech," (New York, June 3, 1963), transcript in *The Southern Patriot*, June 18, 1963, Box 108, Folder 3, Taylor Branch Papers.

<sup>55</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 15, 2010.



the literacy level for voting at the sixth grade. Greenwood, Moses believed, “made it clear that we were going to have to push to do away with the literacy requirement” altogether. If not, “the fight for voter registration—citizenship—would be reduced to a fight for the right of well-educated Blacks,” roughly 10 percent of Mississippi blacks.<sup>56</sup>

Moses informed Burke Marshall that COFO would continue to take illiterate blacks to register. “[U]nder ‘Equal protection of the laws,’” he argued, they “should not be required to take *any* literacy test, since they did not have access to equal, or in some cases any, educational opportunities.” Nonetheless, because the literacy test was state law, most blacks believed “that they have to ‘prepare’ themselves...This results in a great deal of delay. Finally when they have [tried and] are told that they have failed...they are under the illusion that they need to ‘study’ [more] to do better.” A large majority of middle-class blacks actually agreed, feeling that voting was a privilege intended for the educated. Even within SNCC some believed in literacy requirements—although Lawrence Guyot said it took him “about two weeks in SNCC to get disabused of that notion.” Moses therefore repeated these arguments whenever possible. During a testimony before the House Judiciary Committee in Washington in May he bluntly stated that “the country owes it to the Negroes who have been denied the right of an education to offer them an alternative[:] either they be registered without a literacy test [or] provided with a massive education program.” He reminded the Committee of the stakes: Delta blacks were “not going to stand by much longer and have people shoot in their homes.” If Congress failed to act and blacks—outnumbering whites two to one—organized around self-defense instead, Mississippi could erupt into something “ten times worse than Birmingham.”<sup>57</sup>

Moses believed that black unemployment caused by automation and whites’ unwillingness to train sharecroppers in new technologies made universal suffrage even more crucial. During 1962-1963 he repeatedly tried to explain the predicament to Mississippi blacks and to Northerners with resources, since he knew that migrating North was no solution. “[T]o maintain the balance of population in the Delta,” he told the New York forum, “Negroes will have to be supported through a transition era [until] there’s a break in the political situation...food should be supplied continuously. For example, if we have a number of cities around the country...with each city responsible for a given month...it makes a big difference in the psychological attitudes of Negroes [whether] they’ll be willing to stay and fight this out.”<sup>58</sup>

His desire to discourage black migration reflected Moses’ knowledge of life in the North. Mary King recalled that he often lamented how in Northern urban ghettos “families disintegrate from economic pressure; life is filled with the stress of overcrowding, crime, unemployment; no one has any roots, nor sense of community. In Mississippi, blacks belonged. They had built the state.” During one meeting, *The Nation* reported, Moses told Greenwood blacks that “Negroes—and whites—were without jobs in all the big cities of the nation, that they could not run away any more[,] that they must stay and wrench from the State of Mississippi what they deserved as human beings.” Accordingly, Mary

<sup>56</sup> “Executive Committee Meeting,” report, January 1, 1963, File #0808, Reel 3, Series III, Staff Meetings, SNCC Papers; Hammerback and Jensen, “Calling Washington Collect,” in *Civil Rights Rhetoric and the American Presidency*, eds. Aune and Rigsby, 145-146; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 68-69; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 305-307.

<sup>57</sup> Bob Moses to Burke Marshall, letter, February 24, 1963, James Forman Papers, Library of Congress; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 68; Bob Moses, “Report to Voter Education Project of the Southern Regional Council,” no date (likely December 1962), private collection Joan Mulholland Collection; Lawrence Guyot, interview by John Rachal, September 7, 1996, transcript, Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi Collection, University of Southern Mississippi; Hammerback and Jensen, “Robert Parris Moses,” in *African-American Orators*, ed. Leeman, 267; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 107-108; Hampton and Fayer, *Voices of Freedom*, 160; Lewis and D’Orso, *Walking with the Wind*, 204; Carson, *In Struggle*, 88-89.

<sup>58</sup> Cagin and Dray, *We Are Not Afraid*, 182; Bob Moses, “Speech,” (New York, June 3, 1963), transcript in *The Southern Patriot*, June 18, 1963, Box 108, Folder 3, Taylor Branch Papers.

King asserted, “Moses stood out as one of very few individuals in the movement who tried to look at long-range goals beyond the daily circumference of the struggle.”<sup>59</sup>

For example, in January Moses and Charles McDew wrote to Negro American Labor Council leader A. Philip Randolph about their concerns for “the tight circle of slum housing, poor schooling and resulting bad jobs.” They asked the Council “to initiate broadly based action” and proposed discussing initiatives in New York, where they were staying until the end of the month. In February Moses started corresponding with Fay Bennett of the left-leaning National Sharecroppers Fund (NSF) about an NSF proposal of training programs for southern rural youngsters. When Bennett asked Moses for advice about getting American Rental Association loans into Southern rural areas, Moses connected her with Tougaloo President Daniel Beitel and other academics he knew who could inform her “about rural problems in Mississippi and the various programs to find solutions to these.” Displaying a sensitivity to political image, he advised Bennett to seek “an official government representative” to vouch for the NSF; this kind of cover would “dissolve the ever present communist anxieties and save weeks of letter writing.”<sup>60</sup>

The way Moses realized his Literacy Project likewise demonstrates the breadth of his nationwide networks, his broader strategic vision, and his ability to work with(in) white institutions. He initiated the Project after he discovered that teaching illiterate black adults in Greenville, Mississippi, was hampered by a lack of appropriate instructional material. The Literacy Project adjusted its teaching material to Southern rural blacks’ realities by using, for example, easy-to read pamphlets on Social Security and job training. This way literacy also served as “an organizing tool.” The Project was novel too in that it used software (‘programmed instruction’), making it a “technological version” of Septima Clark’s citizenship classes in Dorchester. Having asked Emerson professor Benjamin Wyckoff to develop basic materials, Moses tried them out in Greenville. He attended courses on programmed instruction at Hamilton College and interested his former professor John Blyth, who now worked on techniques using technology in adult literacy programs for the Diebold Group. Moses went to Diebold’s New York headquarters and convinced the company to make a contribution. He connected Blyth with the NSF and the Highlander Folk School; sought funds from the Field, Ford, and Stern Foundations; and tried to interest officials at the Civil Rights Commission and the Southern Regional Council. He took Blyth to Washington to meet Burke Marshall, who helped to secure \$80,000 from Stephen Currier’s Taconic Foundation. Marshall’s involvement underscores the point that there was a closer relationship between SNCC-workers and Justice Department officials than many historians have recognized. After all, Moses said in 1984, “the way this government works there is the official side of everything, and then there are all these unofficial links and relationships which have formed. And people who are in power like that are always in a position to help move different things around.”<sup>61</sup>

The Literacy Project was realized at Tougaloo under Blyth’s supervision and executed by a dozen COFO-workers. Moses used the Diebold grant to renovate a Greenville home to house them.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>59</sup> King, *Freedom Song*, 151-152; Zinn, “The Battle-Scarred Youngsters,” *The Nation*, October 5, 1963.

<sup>60</sup> Charles McDew and Bob Moses to A. Philip Randolph, letter, January 21, 1963, Box 6, Folder 3, Ella Baker Papers, Shomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York; Bob Moses to Fay Bennett, letter, February 21, 1963, File #0324, and Bennett to Moses, February 24, 1963, File #0325, Reel 8, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers.

<sup>61</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 478n.; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 91-93; King, *Freedom Song*, 402, 483; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Joe Sinsheimer, December 5, 1984, Box 108, Folder 1, and Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, February 15, 1991, Box 149, Taylor Branch Papers; Moses interview Dittmer, 1983; “Memorandum on Programmed Learning for Illiterates,” no date, Files #1338–1340, and Moses to Blyth and Blyth to Moses, letters, February 15, 22, 24, 26, 1963, Files #1149, 1153, 1159, 1162, 1170, and Blyth to Daniel Beittel, Jane Eddy, and Benjamin Wyckoff, letters, February 15, 18, 26, 1963, Files #1150-1151, 1167, and Moses to Les Dunbar, Walter Brown, Fay Bennett, and Julian Bond, letters, February 23, 24, 1963, Files #1154, 1155, 1161, 1162, Reel 69, Appendix A: MFDP Papers, SNCC Papers.

<sup>62</sup> One worker was Casey Hayden, the first white Moses asked to work in Mississippi. Initially he recommended she work

The Literacy Project proved so successful that by 1964 various organizations including the United Nations had expressed interest. The program ran into problems, however, when Blyth and Diebold went to court over the material's ownership. Moses always regretted not having "had the foresight to have Blyth work full-time" on the Project. "A lot of stuff gets railroaded in this country because of...a certain element of just greed," he later sighed. The incident confirmed to him once again "how difficult it was to get anything through to poor people."<sup>63</sup>

Moses soldiered on with the Literacy Project. In the spring of 1963 he set up library facilities in Greenville, and later in Greenwood and other COFO-projects. With help from magazines like *Harper's* and *Atlantic Monthly*, he organized a year-long book-drive. Most donations came through Northern churches, Quaker groups, and colleges. Moses contacted his network for "people trained in the field of Library science...to catalogue" the donated books, he helped organize them at the Greenwood office, and occasionally replied donors to inform them of other SNCC projects.<sup>64</sup>

Moses was keen to further the education of native COFO-staff as well in order to better their chances of becoming future leaders. At SNCC's Easter Conference he expressed his wish to "provide for the workers a mass education program while they are working." This was necessary, he elaborated on June 3, because "[t]he big danger is that three or four years from now people will step into office...who have not been in any way identified with the Movement." Not having "associated with the mass of people," they "could then set up an Uncle Tom-kind of relationship with the white community." To this end Moses helped organize a conference for COFO-staff at Tougaloo; got Highlander to pay part of the rent for a Greenwood building that housed "various workshops and educational facilities" year-round; pressed for scholarships for native COFO-workers; and sent Mississippi workers to conferences in Texas and at Highlander. With the New York Friends of SNCC he planned a series of workshops for the staff members of civil rights groups, and asked the New York Center for Programmed Instruction to develop learning materials for COFO-workers. He envisioned training fifteen students in these, who could be stationed "in each SNCC project solely to work on the educational problems of SNCC staff [and] selected members of the local community." He proposed that SNCC set up a tax-exempt arm to facilitate its educational work. Ella Baker accordingly organized FELD (Fund for Educational and Legal Defense), which provided scholarships for SNCC-workers.<sup>65</sup>

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in New York, where a Harlem minister planned a similar project, but she wanted "to work with Bob." For the Harlem project he then suggested Al Poussaint's sister. (Casey Hayden, interview by Blackside, Inc. on May 15, 1986, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Library).

<sup>63</sup> Jerry Tecklin to Burrill L. Crohn, senior consultant Diebold Group, letter, February 24, 1964, Box 1, Folder 1, Jerry Tecklin Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Joe Sinsheimer, December 5, 1984, Box 108, Folder 1, Taylor Branch Papers; Moses interview Dittmer, 1983.

<sup>64</sup> Casey Hayden to Mrs. Robert Sterling, letter, May 11, 1963, File #0210, Reel 9, and Bob Moses to John Fisher, letter, July 26, 1963, File #0876, Reel 6, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, and letters Bob Moses to Dr. Pitts, Valida Diehl, and Vaughn S. Albertson, February 24 and March 6, 1964, File #0149, 0130, 0133, Reel 64, Appendix A: MFDP Papers, SNCC Papers (For type of donors and their letters to Moses, see Files #0117, 0125-0129, 0130, 0132, 0133, 0142-0143, 0144-0145, 0175, 0201, 0260, 0262, 0340, 1008, 1009, Reel 64, Appendix A: MFDP Papers); Dave Dennis, "Field Report," March 1-March 31, 1963, Box 14, Folder 1, CORE Records.

<sup>65</sup> Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 307; Bob Moses, "Speech," (New York, June 3, 1963), transcript in *The Southern Patriot*, June 18, 1963, Box 108, Folder 3, Taylor Branch Papers; Bob Moses to Myles Horton, letter, May 19, 1963, and Moses to Mrs. R.W. McAdoo (Inza), letter, and Horton to Moses, letters, September 24, October 18, 1963, and no date, and James Forman to Myles Horton, letter, November 22, 1963, Box 21, Highlander Research and Education Center Collection, Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin; Vivien Franklin to James Forman, letter, November 25, 1962, File #0433, Reel 6, and "New York Friends training weekend with SNCC in South," memorandum from Theodore Olson to James Forman, Bob Moses, James McCain, Joyce Barrett, Charles Walker and Glenn Smiley, April 4, 1963, File #0530, Reel 8, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, and "Moses Phone Call," transcript by Forman, September 20, 1963, File #0062, Reel 16, Series VII, Communications Department, Internal Communications, and "Progress report on Civil Rights Leadership Institute," memorandum from Constance Curry to Paul Potter, Tim Manning, Casey Hayden, Ella Baker, May 9, 1963, Files #0812-0813 and Report Executive Committee Meeting, January

In addition, Moses masterminded the Tougaloo Work-Study Program in order to “resolve [students’] conflict between working in the movement and going to school.” Dona Richards and Oscar Chase, a Yale law graduate, directed the program from Jackson. The concept was simple: local SNCC-workers received a \$1,000 Field Foundation scholarship to spend a year at Tougaloo after they had carried out a year of voter registration work. This construction, Richards explained, enabled SNCC’s field staff to deepen their understanding of the Movement by attending classes on “contemporary social problems” and having the opportunity to hear speakers from “various parts of the country.”<sup>66</sup>

While working on the Program Moses fell in love with Richards, a 22-year-old black student from New York. She had attended Manhattan’s integrated Elisabeth Irwin High School, the city’s first school based on John Dewey’s principles of progressive education. Her education thus resembled that of Moses at Stuyvesant. In 1959 she went to the University of Chicago and received her B.A. in philosophy four years later. Where Moses carried books by Camus, Richards carried Whitehead, one of Moses’ Harvard analytical philosophers. Dressed in jeans, she is described as “plucky,” “guileless,” and “feisty.” Mary King characterized her as “a woman of the 1990s living in the 1960s.” Moses liked her “fierce independence.” Being “egalitarian by nature,” Moses approached gender roles, to quote Julian Bond, “more sensitively than Martin Luther King, if not perfectly free of gender bias.” Generally SNCC men, who witnessed female bravery in their projects daily, were more open to such matters than SCLC’s ministers. Mary King and Casey Hayden lent copies of Doris Lessing to Moses, and when they challenged gender roles in SNCC in late 1964 found him and Richards among their staunchest supporters. Minutes of a SNCC meeting even note that Moses “suggested considering the substantial change in Cuba of status of women” as a model. He and Richards soon started quietly dating; Julian Bond only realized something was up when a nervous Moses got drunk at a party and hit his head, since “Moses never drunk.”<sup>67</sup>

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1, 1963, Files #0808-0811, Reel 3, Series III, Staff Meetings, and Bob Moses to John Gilmore, letter, February 24, 1963, File #1164-1165, and Bob Moses to Bob Horne, letter, August 8, 1963, File #1197, Reel 69, Appendix A: MFD Papers, SNCC Papers; Grant, *Ella Baker*, 157. These activities show Moses’ keen understanding of current power relations and commitment to what Mary King called “deepening the popular participation in self-governance.” “To merely change the players was not what Bob [and] SNCC wanted,” she explained in 2009, “we did not wish to replace something bad with ‘anything goes.’” (Mary King, email interview by author, 8 December 2009)

<sup>66</sup> “COFO-Staff Executive Meeting,” Minutes, January 10, 1964, James Forman Papers; Mendy Samstein, interview by Anne Romaine, September 4, 1966, Anne Romaine Papers; “Mississippi Student Union,” pamphlet (with section on Work-Study Program), File #00236-00237, Reel 19, Part 2, Series I, Records of the Treasurer, Records SCLC; Dona Richards, “Tougaloo Work-Study Project,” memorandum, no date (likely early 1964), Files #1011–1011A, Reel 39, Series XV, State Project Files and Dona Richards to Maxwell Hahn (Field Foundation), letter, no date (likely fall 1963), Files #0771–0772, Reel 70, Appendix A: MFD Papers, SNCC Papers.

<sup>67</sup> Handwritten notes Taylor Branch, March 13, 1988, Box 108, Folder 1, Taylor Branch Papers; Dona Richards and Oscar Chase to Maxwell Hahn (Field Foundation), letter, no date, File #0771-0772, Reel 70, Appendix A: MFD Papers, and SNCC meeting at Waveland, November 6-12, 1964, minutes, Files #0935-0957, Reel 11, Series V, SNCC Conferences, SNCC Papers; King, *Freedom Song*, 76-77, 463; Mary King, email interview by author, 8 December 2009; Julian Bond, interview by author, Washington DC, October 27, 2008; Dorie Ladner, interview by author, Washington DC, November 16, 2009; SNCC meeting at Waveland, November 6-12, 1964, minutes, Files #0935-0957, Reel 11, Series V, SNCC Conferences, SNCC Papers. The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission did not investigate Dona Richards until May 1964 when she daringly applied to the Law Department of Ole Miss. Richards was never accepted, although the reasons of her rejection remain unclear (apart from racism). Fact is that an Ole Miss attorney corresponded with the MSSC about her application and that the Director of Admissions used bureaucratic tricks to bar her from admission, like noting that she had given them a Jackson address as permanent address, but “none of the letters which have been written to us are from Jackson.” (Erle Johnston to Jack Doty (attorney Ole Miss), letter “Re: Dona Richards Moses, August 25, 1964, and Virgil Downing, “Dona Richard Moses,” Investigative report May 22, 1964, and Dona Richards, “Application for Admission to the School of Law,” April 10, 1964, Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission Online, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, MS, [http://mdah.state.ms.us/arrec/digital\\_archives/sovcom/](http://mdah.state.ms.us/arrec/digital_archives/sovcom/) (accessed November 22, 2007); J.W. Bunkeley to Richards, letter, May 2, 1964, File #1122, Reel 64, Appendix A: MFD Papers, SNCC Papers)

There was little time for romance, however, as Moses was frequently on the road. He often visited other projects, as well as supportive politicians in Washington, whom he “pressed hard for food” for COFO’s commodities drives. In September 1963 he even protracted a “commitment from the Secretary of Agriculture that food was available if it could be channeled through some independent agency.” With Congressman John Lindsay he discussed a ‘freedom garden’ project with “Northern urban representatives” distributing seed to Mississippi blacks. His other activities included monitoring phone bills, arranging transportation for SNCC-workers, collecting the Mississippi projects’ budgets, and reporting these to the VEP. His administrative work was surprisingly detailed, demonstrating that he was not an idealist who abstained from nitty-gritty operations. His proposed budget for April 1963-March 1964, for example, compared office expenses in Greenwood, Greenville, Clarksdale, and Hattiesburg, and calculated costs for gas, car maintenance, lawyer’s fees, and bail. He was nonetheless often late with financial or field reports, which led Wiley Branton to withhold \$1,000 in VEP-funds once. SNCC’s Atlanta headquarters therefore prodded Moses to be punctual but understood his predicament: “We are not trying to hustle you unduly [nor] implying that you might neglect such mundane matters as reporting in favor of the more interesting problem of staying alive.”<sup>68</sup>

Moses’ hands-on organizing did not limit itself to Mississippi. He informed himself about conditions in other states, and pondered solutions with nationwide implications. Some examples particularly reveal the depths of his broader vision for social change and how he used his northern connections to advance it. When Peter Countryman wrote him about organizing a voter registration drive in Virginia, Moses replied: “I thought about that state a lot last year and wonder if you have considered setting up teams in the counties surrounding [Hampton and Norfolk]...I would think it is possible to send teams in to join students from Hampton [Institute] and have a joint project...Given the power of Virginia in Congress this could have important political effects if it were successful.” He suggested contacting Virginia SNCC and his uncle Bill. When SNCC proposed building a community center in Greenwood in November, Moses recommended his architect uncle as the designer. In December he proposed recruiting staff from black colleges in the upper South for SNCC’s Deep South projects. “What happens in the border states now will set the tone for what happens in the Deep South,” he explained. He also advocated supporting home rule in Washington D.C., stating that “it would be a shame not to make a national issue of this...since the South uses Washington [to exemplify] the failure of integration.”<sup>69</sup>

Moses additionally forged North-South alliances through his love for folk music. During the 1963 summer he asked Bob Cohen and his New World Singers for a workshop on freedom songs in Edwards, Mississippi,<sup>70</sup> “to ‘teach-back’ the songs that had originally come from Southern black culture.” On July 6 SNCC organized a Delta Folk Jubilee on Laura McGhee’s farm as well to lift movement participants’ spirits. Theodore Bikel, Bob Dylan, and Moses’ 1950s’ inspiration, Pete Seeger, performed for black Mississippians

<sup>68</sup> James Forman to Clarence B. Jones, letter, September 23, 1963, File #0612, and Casey Hayden to John Fisher, July 9, 1963, File #0874, and Bob Moses to Aaron Henry, letter, no date (likely January 1963), File #0918, Reel 6, Series IV, Executive Secretary James Forman Files, “Moses Phone Call,” transcript by Forman, September 20, 1963, File #0062, Reel 16, Series VII, Communications Department, Internal Communications, SNCC Papers; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 305; Bob Moses to Martha Prescott, letter, December 11, 1962, and Bob Moses to Wiley Branton, letter, February 22, 1963, James Forman Papers; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 93-94.

<sup>69</sup> Bob Moses to Peter Countryman, letter, November 7, 1962, File #0683, Reel 8, and James Forman to William H. Moses, letter, November 20, 1963, File #0672, Reel 7, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, and “Minutes of the Meeting of the SNCC Executive Committee,” December 27-31, 1963, Files #0313-0328, Reel 3, Series II, Executive and Central Committees, Executive Committee, SNCC Papers.

<sup>70</sup> During summer the band and Moses drove from New York to Mississippi for the workshop. For the group it was an eye-opening experience, because, Cohen wrote SNCC, “[w]e know vaguely about ‘the struggle’ and when it comes to a head—but not about the day to day victories and setbacks.” They soon found out: in Tennessee a coffee bar’s white owner kicked them out waving a hatchet. (Bob Cohen to Judy Richardson, letter, no date, William Heath Papers; Bob Cohen, “Sorrow Songs, Faith Songs, Freedom Songs: The Mississippi Caravan of Music in the Summer of ‘64,” in *Freedom is a Constant Struggle*, ed. Erenrich, 177-189)

and several from neighboring Tennessee. Even some Tennessee whites dared to attend. During 1963 national SNCC also regularly organized festivals and concerts in the North to raise funds. Moses attended at least one such concert at Carnegie Hall. Although he claimed in 2010 to have attended merely as a fellow SNCC-worker, he discussed its potential net worth with its organizers, Joanne Grant and Ella Baker. He informed himself about the performing artists' promotional activities, and proposed to "get somebody in the New York office on a permanent basis who will be Negro, Responsible, From the South" to work with artists and "other sophisticates in N.Y." on a permanent basis. He similarly cooperated with folk musicians Guy and Candie Carawan on a fundraising album with music and testimonies from Greenwood movement participants. He narrated its story line because he appreciated its educational value as an "attempt at documentation," but did send recordings to interested organizations through Californian filmmaker Harvey Richards.<sup>71</sup>

When Moses sought northern publicity, he stuck to familiar patterns. He regularly contacted *Harper's* John Fisher, who he kept up-to-date on Mississippi conditions. Moses met others in the publishing business too, like *The Nation's* owner George Kirstein, and proofread manuscripts others wrote about Mississippi. He especially used such contacts to publicize cases of atrocities against Mississippi blacks. By now his preoccupation with whites' lack of interest in the value of black lives had grown almost into a personal mission. SNCC's Courtland Cox particularly remembered Moses' frustration over his inability to publicize violence against blacks to Washington newspapers. He steadfastly sought publicity for Clyde Kennard, a black Mississippian falsely sentenced to seven years imprisonment for stealing \$5 worth of chicken feed. Moses extracted a promise from *The Courier* for a cover story on Kennard, and suggested that the SNCC office in Atlanta contact Kennard's mother for letters. He also sought publicity for the 58 locals arrested in the Itta Bena case because "[t]his incident cannot be ignored by the American people." He told Fisher that he thought the case "really is a fantasy. Seventeen are...in maximum security." Along with the National Council of Churches (NCC), whom Moses sent tapes of the story, he helped raise bail and got the Justice Department to file for their release.<sup>72</sup>

As 1963 progressed with new violence—according to one historian a campaign "of white lawlessness unmatched since 1955"—Moses' concern over the invisibility of blacks' lives solidified his acceptance of a more nationally oriented approach in the fall and winter of 1963-1964. Events in Jackson underlined the need: a sniper, Greenwood White Citizens Council-member Byron De La Beckwith,

<sup>71</sup> Bob Cohen, "Sorrow Songs, Faith Songs, Freedom Songs: The Mississippi Caravan of Music in the Summer of '64," in *Freedom is a Constant Struggle*, ed. Erenrich, 177-189; SNCC News Release, July 1963, Box 2, Folder 3, Howard Zinn Papers; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 109; Robert Parris Moses, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 15, 2010; Murphree, *The Selling of Civil Rights*, 47-48; Guy and Candie Carawan, conversation with author, Raleigh, NC, April 15, 2010; Harvey Richards to "Dear Friends," letter, March 5, 1963, File #0032, Reel 9, and Bob Moses to Dottie Miller, no date (likely January 1963), File #0276, Reel 7, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers. Moses thought the Singers' presence so important he even reprimanded some black youth who were busier smacking mosquitoes than listening to the music.

<sup>72</sup> Courtland Cox, interview by William Chafe, April 26, 1989, transcript, Allard Lowenstein Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; "Miss. Story Told," *The Student Voice* IV, no. 1 (April 1963): 3, in *The Student Voice*, ed. Carson, 67; Dorothy Miller to Rose Daly, letter, March 28, 1963, File #0873, and Bob Moses to John Fisher, letters, July 9 and 26, 1963, File #0874 and #0876, Reel 6, Elisabeth Sutherland to James Forman, File #0271, Reel 9, Bob Moses to Dottie Miller, letter, January 24, 1963, File #0274, and Miller to Moses, letter, no date, Files #0276, and Bertha Gober to Victoria Gray, letter, January 24, 1963, File #0274, Reel 7, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, and John Henrik Clarke to Robert Moses, 21 October 1963, File #0008, Reel 65, Appendix A: MFDP Papers, and John Fisher to Bob Moses, July 3, 1963, File #0002 and John Fisher to Philip Stern, July 3, 1963, File #0003, Reel 40, Series XV, State Project Files, and "Moses Phone Call," transcript by Forman, September 20, 1963, File #0062, Reel 16, Series VII, Communications Department, Internal Communications, SNCC Papers; Marion Palfi to Amzie Moore, July 16, 1963, Box 1, Folder 5, Amzie Moore Papers; Bob Moses to James Forman, letter, no date (likely mid-December 1963), private collection Joan Mulholland.



assassinated Medgar Evers on his driveway on June 12—the day after President Kennedy proposed new civil rights legislation. Angry, blacks marched in the streets of Jackson, but the police stopped them violently. After Evers' funeral 5,000 blacks marched again, but when police used clubs and dogs, they retaliated with bottles and bricks. Blacks' willingness to resort to violence—as Moses had predicted in May—underscored their desperation with the racial situation. COFO-workers likewise felt a growing disillusionment with nonviolence, as one recalled in 1968: "I saw a cop chase women [and] beat people unmercifully...I stood up against a tree and just cried 'cause I couldn't do anything because I promised I wouldn't [but] I couldn't see myself preaching that to anybody [else]." The Jackson Movement's direct action proponents hoped this would revive their campaign, but the conservatives in their committee joined President Kennedy in arranging a deal that ended protests for token concessions. With Evers' death, the Mississippi movement thus lost an important mediator between its conservative forces and the new militant ones.<sup>73</sup>

The Jackson events angered Moses so much that he telegraphed the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, demanding "a full-scale hearing on civil rights in Mississippi immediately." "It is now apparent," he asserted, that the Justice Department "lacks the necessary manpower and legal equipment [to] fulfill its obligations." He particularly blamed the Federal Judiciary in Mississippi, which was "by no means able to respond to...the emergencies of our times with intelligent constructive judicial action" due to its close cooperation with racist law enforcers. That Evers' assassin came "from Greenwood is not insignificant," he added. "It strongly supports the theory that a ring of killers operates out of Greenwood with an official wink from the police." It upset Moses especially that "law officers are most likely to take vengeance" on blacks unaffiliated with the movement. "The country cannot demand the strong legislation needed from Congress because it...cannot connect these stray facts which drift through Mississippi's Cotton Curtain," he concluded, "Only a hearing of the full Commission can command the authority to present these facts to the country."<sup>74</sup>

Meanwhile leaders of national civil rights, labor, and philanthropic organizations, united in the United Civil Rights Leadership Council (UCRLC), began executing A. Philip Randolph's long-cherished plans for a massive March on Washington. The event, held on August 28, is mostly remembered for King's 'I Have a Dream' speech. Many in SNCC, however, resented the behind-the-scenes politicking that pressured John Lewis to censure his government-critical speech. This incident served to strengthen SNCC's suspicion of the federal government, mainstream civil rights organizations, and coalition politics.<sup>75</sup>

Moses attended the March with several busloads of COFO-staff and black Mississippians. Some were brought onto the Lincoln Memorial platform with entertainers like Peter, Paul, and Mary. Spotlighting them, as one worker explained, "helped them believe that they were not alone." Moses noted in 2011 that "the March's organizers didn't think it important that blacks from the Deep South be present. Nor was there any attempt to foreground them [like] a banner leading a section of the march for sharecroppers denied the right to vote. [Instead] the March recruited those who already had the vote." Moses himself "stayed away from all the 'excitement' over John's speech." His main activity was picketing the Justice Department with a sign asking: "When There Is No Justice, What Is The State But a Robber Band Enlarged?" Afterward he spoke with John Doar and Burke Marshall since "opportunities to talk were few and far between."<sup>76</sup>

Several historians refer to the picketing to underscore the differences between Moses and Martin Luther King, with the former exercising his Camus-inspired moral leadership by example-approach

<sup>73</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 165-169, 173; Robert E. Wright, interview by John Britton, July 28, 1968, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University; Evers-Williams and Manning, eds., *The Autobiography of Medgar Evers*, 259-260.

<sup>74</sup> Bob Moses to Berl Bernhard, telegram, no date, File #0137, Reel 10, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers.

<sup>75</sup> Carson, *In Struggle*, 91-95; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 846-887; Lewis and D'Orso, *Walking with the Wind*, 194-195.

<sup>76</sup> Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, 334; Carson, *In Struggle*, 94; Robert Parris Moses, email interview by author, August 20, 2011; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 874-875; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 113-114; Sellers and Terrell, *The River of No Return*, 66.

and the latter trusting inspirational speeches. Taylor Branch claimed that Moses' decision indicated his rebellion against "political vapor" and "conniving with federal authorities to create a public climate for recognizing responsibilities that already were obvious." In 2011 Moses denied such consciousness at the time: "King became the star of the event after his speech, not before...so the decision to picket could not have had anything to do with King. To suggest that is to see King through what he has become in history's eyes and to completely miss the eyes and mind-set of SNCC." After all, the picket was not Moses' intellectual property. From the start, he said, "picketing the Justice Department, for SNCC, was part of the March." In planning meetings SNCC had even advocated that the March went past the Justice Department. The UCRLC rejected the seemingly militant notion, but some SNCC-workers insisted. Supporters of the 'Albany Nine,' a group of SNCC-workers arrested for picketing the store of a juror who had acquitted a sheriff guilty of shooting an Albany black, and of four SNCC-workers charged with the capital crime of sedition for marching in Americus, Georgia, therefore picketed the Department that day as well.<sup>77</sup>

The picket was no condemnation of King's methods. Moses followed what he believed was the most significant contribution he could make that day, in the same way that SNCC's flexible organizational structure allowed other SNCC-workers to appear on stage or stay in their projects if they thought this more useful—or, like Malcolm X, considered the March pointless. This did not imply that he rejected others' decisions to appear in the spotlight. He recognized that that fulfilled a purpose too. He later explained that he identified with organizers like Rustin: "Bayard did not organize that March so that he could himself emerge as a leader; the march was organized so that someone like King could emerge...That's the mark of an organizer [as opposed to a leader]." In this reasoning, what Rustin did for King was the same as what he tried to do for Mississippi blacks. Organizing and leadership were thus not mutually exclusive domains, but rather intrinsically linked complementary stages in producing social change. So unlike biographer Eric Burner's claim of "Moses' refusal to see the [March's] larger significance," he understood how a media event like this could help the civil rights struggle. He and SNCC picketed the Department knowing that the March's momentum provided extra coverage for their causes and added pressure on the administration.<sup>78</sup>

The March on Washington actually influenced Moses' thinking about federal legislation and how to attain it. In another instance of the local influencing the national and vice versa, President Kennedy had proposed a civil rights bill emphasizing desegregation after the events in Birmingham and Jackson. Moses thought the bill disappointing for its failure to address voting rights, but it indicated more might be possible in the future. The March strengthened this belief. Moreover, the probability of national legislation overlapped with Robert Spike's and his National Council of Churches' efforts to lobby for congressional and senatorial civil rights votes from Midwestern states. Both the March and the NCC's actions, Moses admitted 47 years later, percolated his and COFO's ideas "about what we do and the country." Moses met Spike during the March, who told him about the NCC's nascent plans for a campaign focusing on Mississippi as well. Evers' death, Moses explained, "focused a lot of national attention on Mississippi and various individuals and groups were considering doing something." This included influential white Yale graduate and Horace Mann alumnus Allard Lowenstein, who had been a dean at Stanford University, president of the National Student Association, and a delegate to the National Democratic Convention. "In retrospect," Moses argued, Evers' murder "put certain things in motion" which made COFO's 1964 activities possible.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 864-874; Hammerback and Jensen, "Calling Washington Collect," in *Civil Rights Rhetoric and the American Presidency*, eds. Aune and Rigsby, 150.

<sup>78</sup> Moses, "Commentary," in *We Shall Overcome*, ed. Albert and Hoffman, 74; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 108-109, 114; Robert Parris Moses, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 15, 2010; Dittmer, *Local People*, 199.

<sup>79</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 15, 2010, and email interview, August 20, 2011; Robert Parris Moses, interview by John Biewen, "Oh Freedom Over Me" for American Radio Works, 1994 [http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/oh\\_freedom/interview\\_index.html](http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/oh_freedom/interview_index.html) (accessed 25 July 2011, hereafter cited as Moses interview Biewen, American Radio Works, 1994); Murphree, *The Selling of Civil Rights*, 62.

It was thus *after* Evers' death, Moses said, that "things begin to heat up more" and Mississippi SNCC began to move out of its isolation. By September it became even more clear that it needed to escalate its efforts, because whites were: on September 15 the KKK blew up the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, killing four black girls and wounding 23 others. Outrage over the inconceivable reality that children were not even safe in church spread across the nation. Anne Moody recalled tearfully watching television with other COFO-workers in Canton. In a September 26 report Sam Block noted that "our hearts are filled with many emotions...I for one have not yet recovered from the shock and anger I felt...when I learned of the [Birmingham] bombing." Charlie Cobb documented that Greenville blacks now felt more aligned with a broader movement, but Moody observed that in Canton frightened blacks now avoided COFO altogether. On September 18, eight thousand people attended the girls' funeral, eulogized by Martin Luther King. Among them were Moses and a busload of Mississippi blacks and COFO-staff he drove there. In 2011 he recalled the bombing's impact on him: "There was no way we were going to miss going to their 'final say.' I had never driven a bus before in my life, but if that was what it took then we were not going to miss it!"<sup>80</sup>

While these outside events contributed to it, Mississippi conditions and their own limitations dictated COFO's decision to escalate its efforts in the fall. Apart from the violence, COFO worried about its ability to meet blacks' demands for assistance. Its success since 1962, Aaron Henry argued, meant that COFO had become overextended. Its staff was too small to respond effectively to all the requests for help. Moreover, with the large concentration of SNCC-workers in Greenwood Moses noted that "the work in the other areas really sort of suffered," as he had already predicted beforehand. Simultaneously, while more blacks than ever joined the movement, the vast majority had not. Less than half of Mississippi's 82 counties had movement centers. Historian Emilye Crosby's depiction of movement experiences in Claiborne County therefore seems more typical of Mississippi movement involvement than Charles Payne's study of Greenwood. In 1961 the Claiborne NAACP-branch had only 27 dues-paying members and apart from Moses' unsuccessful visit for the Smith campaign, COFO did not organize the county. Despite individual acts of defiance, overall locals felt the national movement was like South-Africa's anti-apartheid movement: "It's just that far away. So never ever would that upset what was going on here." Although they followed the news which "sparked the desire," a broad-based, sustained movement did not emerge until after the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Even Moses admitted that most blacks "were frozen," an attitude the summer's violence aggravated. In a February *New American*-article he already asserted that "[i]t isn't possible in Mississippi at this stage to have an active program carried out by local people except in very special cases where the local people are very strong or where the authorities are conservative rather than fanatical."<sup>81</sup>

The events in Greenwood during the 1963 summer, however, showed that having too many full-time organizers could have ambivalent effects as well. While most SNCC-workers cite Greenwood as its biggest success in developing local leadership, historian Charles Payne rightfully observed it is unclear whether this happened due to or in spite of its large contingent of COFO-workers. Local leadership continued to develop after most outsiders left in April, but as time progressed the Greenwood movement developed a stalemate: the more workers in one place, the less effective it became. As one worker complained in

<sup>80</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 15, 2010, and email interview, August 20, 2011; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 888-892; Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, 345-349; Sam Block, "Greenwood, Mississippi," Field Report, September 26, 1963, File #0107, Reel 17, Series VII, Communications Department, Internal Communications, and Charlie Cobb, "Re: Greenville, Mississippi," field report, November 8, 1963, Files #0964-0969, Reel 5, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers; Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 140.

<sup>81</sup> Henry and Curry, *Aaron Henry*, 129; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Anne Romaine, September 1966/November 14, 1987, Anne Romaine Papers; Crosby, *A Little Taste of Freedom*, 67, 83, 91; "Voter Registration Drive Moses Forward Painfully," *New American*, February 6, 1963.

an August memo: “Because we now have an abundance of staff...we fail to involve community people.” Moreover, morale was “low” and “interpersonal rivalry [and] competition for scarce goods—cars, clothing, food—high.” Interestingly, the memo underscored the necessity of cosmopolitan-educated individuals to curb the problems: “There is a need for the staff to have a conception of having a role in history” because it is “largely because of [this] lack...that many of our current problems [arise].” In this “Bob [Moses] and Stokely [Carmichael] must begin to play a more active role,” since such understanding was “best conceived if it comes out of discussion of experience with the leadership...who have had the opportunity to see things in a broader perspective.” Simultaneously, Wiley Branton reported that Moses already did “too much.”<sup>82</sup>

Arguments over staff discipline emerged as well. Some locals criticized workers for their skirt-chasing, partying, occasional pushiness, and failure to keep promises. The memo discerned two ways of treating SNCC-staff: 1. as being in “a learning and growing experience” in which “irresponsibility is handled with generosity...to help the person become more responsible,” and 2. as “an already disciplined group...After being hired, irresponsibility is not tolerated.” Its author cited Moses as a proponent of the first view and himself and Carmichael of the latter. Moses characteristically operated from the premise that no-one could be blamed for what one was never taught—whether it was literacy or organizing—and that individuals should be allowed to follow their own conscience. The others maintained a solution that lay closer to the more hierarchical set-up SNCC adopted in 1965, including that “staff should be cut” and “someone...given clear responsibility for the Greenwood project.” Tightening funds prompted Atlanta headquarters to ask Moses to act as a disciplinarian as part of his Director job too.<sup>83</sup>

SNCC and COFO had clearly run up against a brick wall in Mississippi; they needed a different strategy in order to surmount their problems. In September COFO therefore decided to dramatize the Mississippi situation by developing Moses’ plans for a large-scale protest geared towards voter registration. This led to COFO’s first statewide project: the Freedom Vote. Its importation of northern whites was a dramatic and controversial innovation that paved the way for SNCC’s most powerful and influential action: the Freedom Summer of 1964.

<sup>82</sup> Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 167, 241, 335; Sam Block, “Greenwood, Mississippi,” field report, September 26, 1963, File #0107, Reel 17, Series VII, Communications Department, Internal Communications, and Mike Miller, “The Greenwood Operation and Related Questions,” memorandum, August 9, 1963, File #0797-0798, Reel 38, Series XV, State Project Files, SNCC Papers.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.* For example, SNCC could not afford to subsidize one worker who was not officially affiliated with SNCC and therefore the Atlanta office requested “he be informed of his status...by Mr. Bob Moses or some other person so authorized and he be asked to leave.” (Ruby Doris Smith to “Whom It May Concern,” September 17, 1963, File #0104, Reel 17, Series VII, Communications Department, Internal Communications, SNCC Papers)

# Crossroads

## 7.1. Freedom Vote

Between fall 1963 and spring 1964 COFO and Moses stood at a strategic crossroads. The successful Freedom Vote campaign had consolidated the Mississippi movement's convergence with the national civil rights movement. Originally a grassroots effort, it gained national significance through its use of northern whites. "What distinguished the Mississippi movement from the foci of the other civil rights movements," Moses argued in 2011, was its "state-wide strategy," which *then* "led to a 'national picture/strategy'"—not vice versa. It prompted new discussions as Moses, who had gained in movement stature, favored expanding its concept on a massive scale in 1964. Preparations for his proposed Mississippi Summer Project, however, deeply divided the SNCC staff. Meanwhile Moses tried to navigate between being a facilitator of grassroots leadership, his new role as national movement spokesman, and his elevated position in SNCC.<sup>1</sup>

The Freedom Vote was an unprecedented, dramatic exercise in democracy that represented continuity *and* discontinuity in movement tactics: an innovative mock election based on traditional political campaigning. Between November 2-4 COFO collected mock ballots among unregistered voters across Mississippi to elect the new governor. Participants could choose between Democrat Paul Johnson, Republican Rubel Philips (both pro-segregationists), and a COFO-backed Independent ticket of Aaron Henry with Rev. Ed King as his running mate. Registered blacks were encouraged to write-in the Henry/King ticket during the real election on November 5. The overall goal of the Freedom Vote, Moses explained, was "to confront Mississippi people [and] the Federal Government with the issues which the politicians of the existing political machinery [are] dedicated to smothering." A massive turnout of 200,000 blacks would dramatize black electoral exclusion by disproving white politicians' claims that blacks did not vote because they did not care—a belief that, according to *Newsweek*, 40 percent of white Southerners shared.<sup>2</sup>

The Freedom Vote's origins are usually attributed to Moses and his conversations with Allard Lowenstein. However, Moses has always maintained that it emerged as an "evolutionary process of looking at how to move." Moreover, "people were continually...batting around different ideas," he said in 1989. "So the idea that it was important to record who first had such and such an idea is itself sort of foreign to the whole culture of the Movement...it's a little annoying to me that there's the need to fix this sort of patent." Lowenstein nonetheless openly took credit for the idea, citing his experience in South Africa of seeing blacks holding a day of mourning when whites voted. Since American blacks supposedly had the vote, he suggested, why not hold a day of voting when whites did? Moses fervently denies this. "The idea certainly is not Al's within the context of the Movement" because similar campaigns "had already been done." He pointed to R. L. T. Smith's campaign and other examples. Discussions about running COFO-backed candidates had been ongoing since early 1962. COFO had not acted upon them because of practical problems and staff suspicion of political involvement.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Robert Parris Moses, email interview by author, August 20, 2011. "Standin' At The Crossroads" is also the title of chapter 3 of Moses' semi-autobiography *Radical Equations*, which describes this period.

<sup>2</sup> Cobb, *The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity*, 233-234; Allard Lowenstein, interview by Robert Wright, March 30, 1970, transcript Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University; Robert Moses, "Statement of Purpose of the Freedom Ballot for Governor," no date, Files #0476-0477, Reel 41, Series XVI, Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, and "Mississippi 'Freedom Vote' Campaign," memorandum, File #0349, Reel 38, Series XV, State Project Files, SNCC Papers; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 294-295; Aaron Henry, interview by Howard Zinn, December 28, 1965, transcript, Box 3, Folder 10, Howard Zinn Papers; Joseph Sinsheimer, "The Freedom Vote of 1963," *Journal of Southern History* 55, No. 2 (May 1989): 223.

<sup>3</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 200-207; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Anne Romaine, September 1966/November 14, 1987, Anne Romaine Papers; Robert Parris Moses, interview by William Chafe, October 7, 1989, transcript, Allard

By the summer of 1963, however, COFO-workers were increasingly receptive to the idea of another political campaign focused on the August 6 Democratic primaries for the gubernatorial nomination. Outside initiatives spurred this development when Northern law students came to Jackson to research Mississippi's legal system. They uncovered a Reconstruction law designed to benefit unregistered whites, which allowed those denied the right to vote to cast affidavits as protest ballots. Local officials afterward decided whether to count them as legitimate votes. COFO decided to exploit the law for unregistered blacks: workers canvassed, held mass meetings, and taught blacks to write sample affidavits in Delta communities. Because the campaign was only a six-week affair, Moses looked outside Mississippi for maximum results. He asked members of Friends of SNCC-groups to act as poll watchers, arranged "national press and T.V. coverage," and requested "nationally known and respected observers." Some 1,000 Delta blacks voted in black churches, homes, and businesses; another 600 were rejected at polls in Sunflower, Holmes, and Hinds County. Three weeks later an impressive 27,000 unregistered blacks cast affidavits in the primary runoff, but all were disqualified. Paul Johnson, the most conservative candidate, won the Democrat nomination for Governor.<sup>4</sup>

Johnson's election left Moses depressed. "It reinforces all that is bad in the state," he wrote SNCC's Executive Committee, "the full resources of the state will continue to be at the disposal of local authorities to fight civil rights gains; the entire white population will continue to be the Klan." Despite SNCC's success in generating local black involvement and providing "considerable material for suits," Moses came to several discouraging conclusions: "1. It is not possible for us to register Negroes in Mississippi" because authorities "will force a showdown over the right to vote...similar to the Federal-State showdowns over integration of schools...2. All direct action campaigns for integration have had their backs broken...3. It is expensive to operate in Mississippi."<sup>5</sup>

Moses advocated a drastic escalation of COFO's tactics. "The only attack worth making," he argued, is one "aimed at the overthrow of the existing political structure[s] of the state. They must be torn down completely to make way for new ones." His proposed method demonstrated his long-term commitment to Mississippi, but added a sense of urgency and scope. SNCC should prioritize the Mississippi project by moving its headquarters to Greenwood and have its chairman and Executive Committee members "spend considerable chunks of time in Mississippi." Moreover, it should launch a 'One Man, One Vote'-campaign "aimed at obtaining the vote in Mississippi by 1964;" "organize local political clubs to support a Negro for Congress;" and explore ways "of ousting Senator Eastland in the 1966 Senatorial elections" and of electing "militant Negroes to local offices" in 1967. He presented his plans to SNCC in early September. Although SNCC refused to move headquarters, it agreed to shift "sufficient personnel" to Mississippi.<sup>6</sup>

The Freedom Vote-concept fitted into what other SNCC and SCLC projects were attempting.

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Lowenstein Papers; William Chafe, *Never Stop Running: Allard Lowenstein and the Struggle to Save American Liberalism* (New York, Basic Books, 1999), 202-203; Allard Lowenstein, interview by Robert Wright, March 30, 1970, transcript Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University; Aaron Henry, interview by Howard Zinn, December 28, 1965, transcript, Box 3, Folder 10, Howard Zinn Papers.

<sup>4</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 200-207; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 290-294, 424; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 112; Mike Miller, "The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party," in *Freedom is a Constant Struggle*, ed. Erenrich, 296; Allard Lowenstein, interview by Howard Zinn, July 11, 1965, transcript, Box 3 Folder 10, Howard Zinn Papers; Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 12-13; Bob Moses to "Dear Friend," August 2, 1963, File #1196, Reel 69, Appendix A: MFDP Papers, and "Delta Negroes To Make Vote Attempts in August 6 Primary," News Release, August 1963, File #1135, Series 13, Series VII, Communications Department, Public Relations, SNCC Papers; Sinsheimer, "The Freedom Vote of 1963," 224. Paul B. Johnson's opponent was James P. Coleman, whom Johnson accused of being "soft on the niggers." Of the 27,000 protest ballots cast, some 90% voted Coleman.

<sup>5</sup> Bob Moses, "SNCC Mississippi Project," memo to SNCC Executive Committee, no date, James Forman Papers, Library of Congress. See also Dittmer, *Local People*, 198-199, and Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 114-115.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*; Report by Executive Secretary, September 24, 1963, Box 5, Folder 1, Staughton Lynd Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.



In Albany SNCC backed two blacks running for political office and in Alabama the Bevels were planning a statewide voting rights campaign with the purpose of defeating Governor George Wallace. James Bevel and Moses were now thinking alike. However, Moses succeeded in building a statewide campaign within months whereas Bevel's Alabama Project never really materialized. This contrast highlights the significance of individual personality and organizational leadership structures. SCLC dissipated its resources on campaigns elsewhere and Bevel's flamboyant character alienated locals and SCLC ministers. Moses' consensus-building disposition and SNCC's flexibility and dependence on grassroots approval in turn produced a more solid campaign in Mississippi.<sup>7</sup>

In some respects, SNCC projects in Alabama and Mississippi developed in parallel. After the Birmingham church bombing a large number of SNCC-workers joined Bernard Lafayette's voting project in Selma, where daily courthouse demonstrations had led to the imprisonment of 300 blacks. Jailed SNCC-workers then conceived of a 'Freedom Day' on October 7, which entailed amassing blacks at the courthouse to demand immediate registration. The Mississippi Freedom Vote had already been approved by then. Still the similarity in approach underlines the fact that by the autumn of 1963 SNCC recognized an urgent need to escalate its tactics.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, Freedom Vote-formulations converged with liberal whites' desire to become involved in the South after Birmingham, the March on Washington, and Medgar Evers' death raised the national profile of the civil rights movement. As Ella Baker observed in 1967, Northern white involvement became a natural part of the movement: "[The South] became a sort of magnet...So it wasn't just a question of developing national support [but] of providing opportunities for that drive on the part of young people... in the North and the West, to help with something."<sup>9</sup>

Arranging northern white involvement in the Freedom Vote, however, was not straightforward. When Allard Lowenstein proposed to enlist Yale and Stanford students' help in early September, Moses withheld an answer for several weeks. Despite popular memory, white involvement was never part of the original plan. Although CORE had used white volunteers in its Louisiana voting projects, Moses still feared that bringing them to Mississippi would invite physical danger and create psychological problems for the black staff members. In 1982 he stated that when SNCC headquarters put "direct pressure" on its Mississippi wing in the 1962-1963 winter to integrate its staff, the latter had refused. Deferring to the local movement, headquarters indeed notified interested whites that "there are absolutely no openings to work in SNCC projects in Mississippi for whites."<sup>10</sup>

By late 1963 a dozen whites had nonetheless participated in the August primaries and some worked fulltime in Mississippi: Casey Hayden (Literacy Project), Hunter Morey (Greenville), Mike Miller and Dick Frey (Greenwood), CORE's Michael and Rita Schwerner (Meridian), and Mendy Samstein (Jackson). In a sense, Moses had his hand forced. Mike Miller, for example, had come for the Delta Folk Jubilee and instantly decided to stay. Moses, Miller recalled in 2010, was hesitant to approve this decision because he feared violence. But Sam Block and James Forman thought otherwise; the three men "huddled, right there on Laura McGhee's farm," until Moses agreed to "do a test. We'll see what happens with a white worker in the Delta." It failed miserably: when police arrested Miller shortly after, they restricted whites to the SNCC-office. "We almost suffocated them," Moses admitted in November. "They couldn't go out

<sup>7</sup> Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 14; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 287-356; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 892-893, 899-900; Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 141, 144-145, 190, 212, 245-246, 285-286; Robert Parris Moses, email interview by author, August 26, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ella Baker, interview by Anne Romaine, March 25, 1967, transcript, Anne Romaine Papers.

<sup>10</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 199; Cagin and Day, *We Are Not Afraid*, 212-213; Rothschild, *Northern Volunteers and the Southern 'Freedom Summers'*, 22-23; Moses interview Carson, 1982; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Anne Romaine, September 1966/November 14, 1987, Anne Romaine Papers; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 72-73; Ruby Doris Smith to George Goss, letter, May 17, 1963, File #1020, Reel 9, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers.

in the street...they were wiping dishes[,] sweeping floors[,] doing all the dirty work [because] we wanted very carefully to avoid any trouble."<sup>11</sup>

Deploying northern whites as field workers was thus a completely different matter, one that invited intense discussion among the COFO-workers. Native blacks, like Sam Block and Willie Peacock, strenuously opposed the idea, arguing that it would endanger everyone involved. However, it was increasingly evident that SNCC's slow organizing approach could not accomplish a statewide enterprise within barely two months. Even with SNCC-workers from other states, COFO needed more manpower. Equally important, Moses recounted in 1966, "the staff was exhausted [and] butting up against a stone wall...How long could you expect them to survive working in that kind of isolation?" He was tired too. Over the summer several workers recorded witnessing, as one wrote, "the tired, tragic face of Moses." Something had to give, Ed King claimed: "We needed something new or we needed to quit." When Allard Lowenstein cornered him in the Jackson office in late September, Moses agreed to his proposal with SNCC's half-hearted consent. "The need is desperate," he wrote the Yale and Stanford students, "and we would be grateful for any help you may be able to get us." The request involved no clear-cut decision with regard to integrating the Mississippi staff. "We couldn't answer the question of integration for the long term," he later explained, "but we could agree to use it for [this] particular purpose." Lowenstein then returned to California and helped recruit some 70-90 volunteers.<sup>12</sup>

On October 6 COFO organized a convention at Jackson's Masonic Temple to discuss the campaign. Five hundred local and fulltime COFO-workers from across the state—connecting them for the first time—attended. They formed a campaign committee and elected Aaron Henry to head the ticket because he was well-known, experienced, a Delta-native, and attractive to conservative NAACP-members. Moses was later selected campaign manager. They approved a platform advocating immediate universal suffrage, school desegregation by 1965, a crash program "to improve all phases of the educational system," a State Fairness Commission to "insure non-discrimination in jobs, public places [and] equal justice under the law," and the establishment of job retraining programs. Other planks included a just minimum wage, repeal of anti-labor laws, and land reform. Overall the platform "was more sophisticated and militant than [most black Mississippians'] political attitudes," one historian has noted, a fact that clearly reflected SNCC influence.<sup>13</sup>

COFO then established a campaign organization in which locals and fulltime organizers staffed state, district, and county committees. The campaign generated support through mass meetings at which both formal leaders and 'uncredentialed' ones spoke. Aaron Henry did a one-speech-a-night tour and Jackson headquarters sought local radio and television time. The COFO-office distributed 150,000 copies of the *Mississippi Free Press*, 4,000 posters, and 20,000 leaflets. Dave Dennis, Charles Evers, R.L.T. Smith, and Tougaloo's Henry Briggs respectively chaired the state policy, speaker, finance, and public relations

<sup>11</sup> Mike Miller, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 15, 2010; Greenberg, ed. *Circle of Trust*, 81; Minutes SNCC Meeting in Greenville, November 1963, Box 2. Folder 10, Howard Zinn Papers; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 73; Sinsheimer, "The Freedom Vote of 1963," 228.

<sup>12</sup> Mendy Samstein, interviews by Anne Romaine, September 4, 1966, and Robert Parris Moses, interview by Anne Romaine, September 1966/November 14, 1987, transcripts, Anne Romaine Papers; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 149; Cagin and Day, *We Are Not Afraid*, 213-214; Bob Johnson to James Forman, letter, June 27, 1963, File #0131, Reel 7, and Casey Hayden to Guido Goldman, letter, July 2, 1963, File #0665, Reel 6, Series IV, Executive Secretary James Forman, SNCC Papers; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 73; Ed King, interviews by William Chafe, March 10 and October 30, 1988, transcript, Allard Lowenstein Papers; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 295; Joseph Sinsheimer, "The Freedom Vote of 1963," *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 55, No. 2 (May 1989): 229-230.

<sup>13</sup> "Two Run In Mississippi Freedom Vote," SNCC News Release, no date, File #0751, Reel 70, Appendix A: MFDP Papers, and "Mississippi 'Freedom Vote' Campaign," memorandum, File #0349, Reel 38, Series XV, State Project Files, SNCC Papers; Sinsheimer, "The Freedom Vote of 1963," 226-227. Dittmer, *Local People*, 201-202.

subcommittees. SCLC's Annelle Ponder was the Delta's second district manager, so all the big civil rights organizations held top positions.<sup>14</sup>

As campaign manager, Moses played a more visible than the one he had during R. L. T. Smith's campaign. He explained the campaign to outsiders, organized press conferences, sent fundraising letters, contacted the Justice Department, and, one worker reported, accompanied "Henry on the campaign tour; he is speaking at length on the Freedom Ballot itself, its importance, [and] helping the community to organize."<sup>15</sup>

The inclusion of Ed King, a white man, on the COFO ticket directly reflected Moses' views about integration as well as his insights into locals' psychology. King was a 27-year-old chaplain at Tougaloo College who had been involved in the Jackson demonstrations. He stated in 2010 that Moses, Henry, and others deliberately advocated an interracial ticket. Although Moses "preached at me," King recalled, he was reluctant to say yes because he was still recovering from a car accident likely caused by racists. He worried about becoming even "more of a target," and had to consider his family. But Moses was persistent, asking him to "think of what it will be if we could show that people *are* interested in voting, and are willing to vote for black and white candidates who *ask* for their vote." King countered that he doubted blacks would trust a white Southerner. Moses dismissed this; he even argued that King's bandaged face could be used to the campaign's advantage. "They could be explained: 'He worked with Medgar Evers. We think somebody tried to kill him.'" On October 13 King then agreed to join the ticket.<sup>16</sup>

Moses' most significant contribution lay in safeguarding the grassroots base of the enterprise and turning it into an organizing tool. Seeing the effort as a means of ensuring long-term continuity for the movement—that is, "the opportunity...to establish a real statewide community of leadership for Negroes"—he favored local agency whenever possible. He emphasized that election practicalities, such as opening times, should "depend on the judgment of the leaders in the community." Telephone records show that "Bob emphasizes that [campaign material] should not have SNCC name on them" because he feared this threatened grassroots initiatives and COFO-unity. He instructed workers to record people's contact information at polling places, list buildings that served as meeting places, and identify which "individuals have accepted the various responsibilities in each community." Although he supported the idea to "have national figures serve as poll observers" and his plans for the final rally included "an all-star

<sup>14</sup> Joan Bowman, "Report from SNCC Field Secretary The Freedom Ballot for Governor," October 23, 1963, Files #0117-0118, Reel 15, Series VII, Communications Department, Internal Communications, and "Organizational Framework," memorandum from State Executive Committee to Elect Aaron Henry Governor of Mississippi to Statewide Campaign Staff, no date, File #0373-0374, and "Mississippi Freedom Vote Henry: Planning Details for Freedom Vote for Governor," October 1963, File #0346, Reel 38, Series XV, State Project Files, and "Budget," report, File #0758, and "Election Procedures," memorandum from the State Office in Jackson to District Managers and Field Workers, October 25, 1963, File #0733, Reel 68, Appendix A: MFDP Papers, SNCC Papers; Dittmer, *Local People*, 204; Sinsheimer, "The Freedom Vote of 1963," 228. Each state, district, and county network had its own executive committees, campaign managers, chairmen, and subcommittees on speaking, finances, policy, and public information, and were aided by a Research and Publicity Department. Their jobs ranged from arranging transportation, supplying "basic information" to field workers, and renting offices, to preparing campaign material and media coordination. Thanks to FCC-threats, Jackson TV-stations "covered Jackson-events from the start but refused...anything more than one-minute spot announcements [although] one TV station conducted two 15-minute interviews with Henry and King." (Committee to Elect Aaron Henry Governor, "A Petition Requesting Congress to investigate state-supported denial of constitutional rights in Mississippi, presented to US Congress November 25, 1963," Box 1, Folder 20, Howard Zinn Papers.)

<sup>15</sup> "Organizational Framework," memorandum from State Executive Committee to Elect Aaron Henry Governor of Mississippi to Statewide Campaign Staff, no date, File #0373-0374, Reel 38, Series XV, State Project Files and Wiley Branton to Robert Moses, letter, October 23, 1963, File #0454, Reel 64, Appendix A: MFDP Papers, and Ivanhoe Donaldson, "Another Incident of Brutality in Mississippi," field report, 30 October through 5 November, 1963, Files #1090-1092, Reel 7, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers; Field Report Joan Bowman, October 23, 1963, Box 1, Folder 20, Howard Zinn Papers;

<sup>16</sup> Ed King, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 14, 2010; Dittmer, *Local People*, 202; Sinsheimer, "The Freedom Vote of 1963," 227.

slate of entertainers,” his primary concern was to ensure wider interest among grassroots participants, not appeal to a national audience.<sup>17</sup>

Moses nevertheless understood that national awareness would help to determine the success of the Freedom Vote. “In a large part the final effect of this effort depends on how much attention we can command from the National press,” he admitted in one memorandum. Despite COFO’s hard work, however, SNCC’s Joan Bowman reported that “only [the] *Mississippi Free Press* and local press attended” the opening press conference on October 14. That evening’s first political campaign rally drew only 400 locals. Furthermore, she complained, “We cannot move or think on any subject without defining these topics in terms of what they will cost.” COFO could not “see even one-fifth” of the proposed \$20,500 budget. On October 17 Moses appealed to Allard Lowenstein: “We need your help—desperately...We will not be able to utilize the basic information media—posters, leaflets, and the news outlets—unless we can pay for them.” COFO also needed money for their so-called ‘Vote Mobiles,’ twenty rented and fourteen staff cars with ballot boxes, that allowed workers to canvass remote areas faster. Lowenstein went to New York to raise funds and approached Martin Luther King, Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young of the Urban League, and *Life*-magazine and NBC. National SNCC sent out fundraising appeals and advised Friends of SNCC-groups to contact newspapers in Boston, Chicago, and New York by using the “good angle” of Moses and Dona Richards, who had attended schools there. Despite sympathetic articles that appeared in the *National Guardian* and *The Village Voice*, Bowman reported that national press coverage remained “disappointing”; COFO still needed to “get the nation alerted.”<sup>18</sup>

Few in COFO, however, anticipated the publicity that the northern white volunteers aroused upon their arrival on October 22. In fact, Moses had never viewed this to be their responsibility. “We just wanted them to get out the vote,” he insisted at a November COFO-meeting. It annoyed him that historians often showcased the role of Allard Lowenstein, depicting it as “somehow critical in the direction of the Movement.” Historian Charles Payne called this ‘Columbus Discovered America’-history making: “[H]istory is something that happens when the White Folks show up and stops when they leave.” While Moses acknowledged that Lowenstein was crucial in recruiting the volunteers, he believed that the volunteers augmented rather than directed locals’ initiatives. But Lowenstein saw it differently. If the solution entailed informing as many people as possible, he figured, they had to bypass locals and call in any powerful figure he knew.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> “Urgent Top Priority Re: Special staff meeting and rally; program suggestions for campaign efforts,” memorandum from Robert Moses to Aaron Henry for Governor Campaign Workers, no date (likely early October 1963), Box 1, Folder 20, Howard Zinn Papers; Robert Moses, “Statement of Purpose of the Freedom Ballot for Governor,” no date, Files #0476-0477, Reel 41, Series XVI, Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, and “Election Procedures,” memorandum from the State Office in Jackson to District Managers and Field Workers, October 25, 1963, File #0733, Reel 68, Appendix A: MFDPP Papers, and Mary King to Bob Rogers, letter, October 24, 1963, File #1180, Reel 8, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers; Mike Sayer, “WATS-notes,” October 30, 1963, Box 1, Folder 1, Mary King Papers. In her letter to Bob Rogers Mary King noted that “Bob thinks that it would be a great asset...if Aaron Henry were to begin receiving telegrams and letters of support [from] well-known people [especially] movie stars...at the time of the large rallies.”

<sup>18</sup> Robert Moses to “Dear Sir,” letter, October 1963, File #0461, Reel 41, Series XVI, Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, and Joan Bowman, “Report from SNCC Field Secretary The Freedom Ballot for Governor,” October 23, 1963, Files #0117-0118, and WATS-report, no date, File #0063, Reel 15, Series VII, Communications Department, Internal Communications, and Julie Prettyman to “Dear Sir,” letter, no date, File #0374, Reel 38, Series XV, State Project Files, and Prettyman to Moses, letter, October 1963, File #0026, Reel 65, Appendix A: MFDPP Papers, SNCC Papers; “Urgent Top Priority,” memorandum from Moses to Aaron Henry for Governor Campaign Workers, no date (likely early October 1963), Box 1, Folder 20, Howard Zinn Papers; Moses to Allard Lowenstein, letter, October 17, 1963, William Heath Papers; SNCC Papers; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 123.

<sup>19</sup> SNCC Meeting in Greenville, minutes, November 1963, Box 2, Folder 10, Howard Zinn Papers; Robert Parris Moses, interview by William Chafe, October 7, 1989, transcript, Allard Lowenstein Papers; Payne, “Bibliographic Essay: The Social Construction of History,” in *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, Payne, 424.

On the surface Lowenstein and Moses had little in common. Lowenstein's specialty, Julian Bond said, was indeed that "he knew everybody," including Hubert Humphrey and other political heavyweights. Ella Baker and James Forman, who had disliked Lowenstein ever since their days in the Northern Student Association, warned Moses repeatedly about his opportunistic habits, like "calling big name people all the time" without group approval. Lowenstein failed to understand why this upset SNCC-workers. "[H]e felt authorized," Ed King explained in 1988, "if they had accepted him they had accepted him. This was the way he did things." SNCC's routine of endless discussions was alien to him as well. "[My] idea was that people who ran the risks needed to [control] the decisions," Moses explained, "[but Al thought there should] be some board and then the staff works for the board and the board makes the policy decisions." Consequently Lowenstein thought that since he recruited them, he controlled the volunteers, rather than having them work at locals' service. When Moses told one volunteer not to go to Yazoo City because it was too dangerous, the latter complained to Forman that Lowenstein, not Moses, directed his moves. Forman exploded: "If Lowenstein told him to go to heaven and Moses said he should go to hell, then he'd better start packing his summer clothes." When Lowenstein brought a group of volunteers to Yazoo City regardless, John Lewis drove down and took them back to Jackson.<sup>20</sup>

Such conflicts complicated Moses' efforts. Some SNCC-workers even blamed him for Lowenstein's presence. "Why are you dealing with this guy?" Lawrence Guyot asked Moses, "This is contrary to everything we operate by." Moses knew this, but felt that COFO had no choice. In 2008 Julian Bond recounted that Moses nevertheless kept Lowenstein "at arm's length." Not because he considered him "a bad person," but because he wanted "to take us in a direction we don't want to go." Similarly Lowenstein admired Moses—calling him "brilliant" and "indispensable"—but questioned his judgments. Participatory democracy was "wasting valuable time," and the absence of hierarchy meant that "who could do what was quite fuzzy." Nonetheless, Ed King argued, the two men complemented each other: "Lowenstein understood politics and America; Moses understood man and Mississippi. Lowenstein[’s task] was to see our problems from his unique perspective [while Moses] could...place it in a Mississippi framework." Moses characteristically sought consensus. He answered Guyot: "[H]e's got a lot of contacts. I think we can work with him. Let's try it." He wrote Lowenstein that he believed "we should be able to work well...after we are around each other a day or so." For the most part, Julian Bond acknowledged, SNCC-workers accepted Lowenstein as "a necessary evil; a guy you wanted to have but couldn't abide when you did."<sup>21</sup>

Most SNCC-workers appreciated the advantages of using the white volunteers. "There is no better way to commit the young and frequently confused about the civil rights movement," Joan Bowman reported, "than to get them on the scene." Since there was no time to train the whites in dealing with locals, COFO placed half of them in the Jackson and Greenwood offices. Their skills—typing, running mimeographs, and experience with political campaigns—were best utilized there, and their presence freed experienced COFO-activists to work in the field. The students also brought money and contacts: they were in touch with their congressmen and hometown newspapers, and the Yale and Stanford communities raised \$11,400. This helped SNCC to purchase a WATS-telephone line, which not only made long-distance calls much cheaper, but also allowed messages to be conveyed without fear of detection.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Julian Bond, interview by William Chafe, December 18, 1990, and Ed King, interviews by William Chafe, March 10 and October 30, 1988, transcripts, Allard Lowenstein Papers; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 146; Cagin and Dray, *We Are Not Afraid*, 216-217; Chafe, *Never Stop Running*, 205; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 356-357; Sinsheimer, "The Freedom Vote of 1963," 237.

<sup>21</sup> Lawrence Guyot, interview by William Chafe, March 30, 1986, transcript, Allard Lowenstein Papers; Julian Bond, interview by author, Washington DC, October 27, 2008; Robert Parris Moses and Allard Lowenstein, interviews by Anne Romaine, September 1966/November 14, 1987, and March 4, 1967, transcripts, Anne Romaine Papers; Allard Lowenstein, interview by Clayborne Carson, May 17, 1977, transcript, Allard Lowenstein Papers; Chafe, *Never Stop Running*, 188; Sinsheimer, "The Freedom Vote of 1963," 222, 229.

<sup>22</sup> Field Report Joan Bowman, October 23, 1963, Box 1, Folder 20, Howard Zinn Papers; Ed King, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 14, 2010; Carson, *In Struggle*, 96; Chafe, *Never Stop Running*, 185; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*,

Some in COFO, however, resented these “super-educated Americans.” The office-field division of labor intensified resentment due to SNCC’s and COFO’s group-centered leadership structure. As in Greenwood, it became evident that what made SNCC’s structure effective became its Achilles’ heel when numbers and schedules required speedy decision-making. Usually policies were determined in consultation with locals and as many COFO-representatives as possible. Now the pressure of time, added to the growing scope of the project, made leisurely consultation more and more difficult. Smaller groups increasingly made decisions in the Jackson headquarters, where the white volunteers were concentrated. This fuelled an unjustified suspicion among field workers that the white volunteers, in Mendy Samstein’s words, “were intimately involved in the decision-making process whereas they [the field workers]...were excluded.”<sup>23</sup>

When white volunteers joined the field workers, the effect was just as double-edged. When experienced blacks accompanied a white volunteer during canvassing, they noticed how local blacks immediately directed themselves to the white “appearing to agree with anything he said.” Some whites then simply *told* locals to complete the Freedom Ballot. While this increased the number of votes cast, it bypassed ideas of black empowerment. Charles Cobb noticed the same problem with COFO’s few fulltime white workers. Hunter Morey directed the Greenville project successfully but, Cobb complained, “Negroes are reacting to his whiteness, or completely accept the idea of a white directing Negroes. [They look at] whatever being white means today, not what it may mean after the struggle is over.”<sup>24</sup>

The attention that Northern papers lavished on the volunteers added to the resentment of some black COFO-workers. Stories emphasized incidents like the beating of Yale student Bruce Payne and the arrests of Moses with two other Yale students—one of them the nephew of a congressman—for “running a stop sign.” Mendy Samstein sardonically recorded that during the campaign’s final rally, “NBC spent most of their time shooting film of the Yalies and seemed hardly aware of the local people and full-time SNCC-workers.” *The Stanford Daily* complained that “the national media could be drawn in only by Northern white students [and] ignored the dedicated civil rights workers who were in the South months before [and who] will be there for months to come.”<sup>25</sup>

COFO-workers’ resentment grew when the federal government, which publicly ignored the campaign to prevent further alienation of Southern white voters, flooded Mississippi with Justice Department officials and FBI agents. Lawrence Guyot later claimed that it was “a problem to count the number of FBI agents who were there to protect the students. It was just that gross.” According to Stokely Carmichael, it was a revelation to Moses “that the violence could actually be controlled. [Turned] on and off...at least for three weeks.”<sup>26</sup>

The increased federal presence did not, however, prevent the harassment of COFO-workers. One such incident occurred on November 2 when Charlie Cobb, Ivanhoe Donaldson, and Don Harris

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148; Sinsheimer, “The Freedom Vote of 1963,” 231-232, 234.

<sup>23</sup> Mendy Samstein, “Notes on Mississippi,” report, no date 1963, Folder 1, Mendy Samstein Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin. According to Ed King, Moses appeased SNCC-workers’ concerns by saying “gently: ‘We have to get along. This is helping us. We were able to get...a thousand leaflets printed that we otherwise could not have.’” (Ed King, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 14, 2010)

<sup>24</sup> Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 151; Charles Cobb, “Re: Greenville, Mississippi,” field report, November 8, 1963, Files #0964–0969, Reel 5, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers; Mendy Samstein, interview by Anne Romaine, September 4, 1966, transcript, Anne Romaine Papers.

<sup>25</sup> Sinsheimer, “The Freedom Vote of 1963,” 232, 234, 238-239; Dittmer, *Local People*, 203-205; John Herbers, “50 Yale Men Aid Mississippi Negro” and “Norman Thomas Mocks Mississippi,” *New York Times*, October 30 and November 1, 1963; Mendy Samstein, “Notes on Mississippi,” report, no date 1963, Folder 1, Mendy Samstein Papers; News release “Jackson, Mississippi,” October 27, 1963, File #00362, Reel 5, Part 1, The White House Central Files, Civil Rights During the Johnson Administration Collection, Papers of Lyndon B. Johnson (hereafter cited as Papers Lyndon Johnson), Microfilm, Roosevelt Study Center, Middelburg, the Netherlands.

<sup>26</sup> O’Reilly, “*Racial Matters*,” 158; Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 353-354.



went to the Jackson airport in a rented Oldsmobile to drop Moses off for a short business trip to Memphis. A policeman, Donaldson recorded, arrived to question them. Because the workers had left the Oldsmobile's papers at the SNCC-office, the police man detained them. Before Samstein could arrive with the papers, however, the policeman released Moses to board his plane and ordered the others to leave. This had just been a stalling tactic until two more policemen could arrive: as soon as the SNCC-workers left, the three followed them and at a gas station chastised them for two hours. One falsely arrested Donaldson for having "illegal plates" and beat him twice with his gun while yelling: "Goddamned black bastards think they're going to be taking over around here. Well, you and the other goddamned Moses' niggers around here ain't gonna git nuthin but a bullet in the haid!" He placed his gun in Donaldson's face and cocked the hammer, but another policeman stopped him: "You just can't kill that nigger, heah." They then let them go. When Moses returned from Memphis, he called Jackson headquarters on four different telephones, but was warned each time he "better not call that number again."<sup>27</sup>

COFO additionally encountered resistance to the Freedom Vote among middle-class blacks, especially black ministers. One worker reported from Batesville that not one black preacher supported the campaign. Their reasons varied. They felt that a mock election was a waste of time; they feared jeopardizing their jobs, businesses, and churches; or regarded SNCC as too radical. Some opposed the idea that illiterate blacks should be allowed to vote. The Freedom Vote thus became the first large-scale challenge to hegemonic ideas in both white and black community of who is 'credentialized' to run society. One historian therefore called it a "revolution within a revolution" of "black 'have nots' against their former leaders, the black 'haves'"; one Holmes County black even literally threatened a black grocer to participate or be boycotted.<sup>28</sup>

But many poor blacks refused to become involved either. Bolivar County's working-class blacks, Ivanhoe Donaldson reported, were scared. "As soon as Charlie [Cobb] and I started talking about voting, people started backing away...We just weren't able to make any headway." Fear even permeated relatively progressive places like Greenville. "There was no resistance," Cobb documented. "Yet only 2,500 of the approximately 20,000 who were eligible, voted...Reason? That combination of rural fear, urban apathy, and being in Mississippi."<sup>29</sup>

Moses worried about potential violence too. "Bob was very troubled about getting people to expose themselves to retribution," Allard Lowenstein recalled in 1967, "and then there not being any workers...to help them to stand what retribution would come." Because the volunteers would soon leave and because COFO lacked the numbers to organize the entire state, the campaign committee decided not to go into all of Mississippi's counties. According to Lowenstein, this decision reflected Moses' reluctance "to go into places where he couldn't leave workers." Rather than campaign in dangerous areas, COFO mailed 25,000 ballots to be "submitted anonymously."<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Ivanhoe Donaldson, "Another Incident of Brutality in Mississippi," field report, 30 October through 5 November, 1963, Files #1090-1092, Reel 7, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 118. "Jackson Press Release," no date, Box 22, CORE Records.

<sup>28</sup> Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, 361-362; Rothschild, *Northern Volunteers and the Southern 'Freedom Summers'*, 24-25; Sinsheimer, "The Freedom Vote of 1963," 225, 234-236; Cobb, "Re: Greenville, Mississippi," report, November 8, 1963, File #0964-0969, Reel 5, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, and "Plans for Attack and Weekly Report, From September 29, 1963," report by Willie Blue, October 2, 1963, File #0108, Reel 17, Series VII, Communications Department, Internal Communications, SNCC Papers; Crosby, *A Little Taste of Freedom*, 104.

<sup>29</sup> Ivanhoe Donaldson, Field Report, 30 October through 5 November 1963, File #1089, and John Ball, Field Report, November 4, 1963, Files #0958-0959, Reel 7, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers; Cobb, *The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity*, 234.

<sup>30</sup> Allard Lowenstein, interview by Anne Romaine, March 4, 1967, transcript, Anne Romaine Papers; Dittmer, *Local People*, 205.

Workers used a variety of methods to limit dangers. Whenever possible, they sought white cooperation. As the Hinds County campaign manager, Dona Richards for instance requested police permission to use sound trucks. More often their enterprise resembled an ‘underground’ operation. In Jackson, Meridian, and elsewhere canvassing was done by dividing the towns into blocks, each covered by local students and headed by a community member, the ‘block captain,’ to avoid detection and spur local agency. In Greenwood workers canvassed in the cotton fields, but did so secretly in threesomes, dressed as fellow cotton pickers: one stood guard, another explained the campaign, and the third hid completed ballots in his cotton sack. In its final days, when the atmosphere surrounding the campaign reached fever pitch,<sup>31</sup> COFO circumvented white hostility by campaigning during black church services. At one Jackson church, *The Texas Observer* reported, “hundreds of Negroes, including the choir marching past in song, placed their mock ballots in two boxes in the front.” The majority of all votes obtained during the November 2-4 weekend came from church collections, but blacks also voted in private homes, businesses, and social clubs. “[I]t turned out,” Ed King noted, “that the people were angrier, more willing to suffer [and] fight than the leaders recognized.”<sup>32</sup>

On Monday night, November 5, COFO-workers gathered at the Masonic Temple in Jackson to celebrate the results. Most historians claim that an unprecedented 83,000 blacks voted,<sup>33</sup> with 99% voting for Henry and King. However, the numbers fell far short of COFO’s goal of 200,000 votes. Moreover, a break-down of the result revealed that two-thirds of the votes came from eight counties, and in 25 counties fewer than 100 ballots were cast. Only one-fifth of the votes came from areas with fulltime COFO-projects.<sup>34</sup>

COFO nevertheless hailed the result as a victory. “[H]ad there been no police interference,” the campaign committee asserted, and “had campaign[er]s been permitted to speak on college campuses and to move about freely...Henry and King might have reached the total of more than 200,000 votes predicted...Governor-elect Johnson received less.” After Lowenstein, Henry, and King had addressed the euphoric crowd, Moses thanked the local workers. “The measure of freedom has now been heard in every part of Mississippi because you took it there,” he told them, “Though we certainly can’t realize it, history was being made all over the state this week.” He went on to state the campaign’s strategic

<sup>31</sup> The state reacted with traditional means like violence and arrests on trumped-up charges; *The Student Voice* reported 60 arrests within 21 days on traffic violations alone (of a 200 arrest total). SNCC-records count numerous incidents of police misconduct and white intimidation. The city of Canton even hired 25 extra policemen to discourage locals from voting, and elsewhere police raided the polling places. (“Miss. Workers Face Police Harassment,” *The Student Voice* 5, no. 13 (June 2, 1964): 3, in *The Student Voice*, ed. Carson, 157; “WATS reports,” October 23, 1963, Box 1, Folder 1, Mary King Papers; Untitled Field Report, No Date, File #0936-0937, Reel 7, and “Summary of Events, October 22 through October 28,” File #0040, Reel 6, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, and “Events In Mississippi November 1 and 2” memorandum, Files #0739-0740, Reel 68, Appendix A: MFDP Papers, SNCC Papers; Sinsheimer, “The Freedom Vote of 1963,” 232, 234, 238-239; Dittmer, *Local People*, 203-205)

<sup>32</sup> Committee to Elect Aaron Henry Governor of Mississippi, “Mississippi Freedom Vote Henry,” report, October 10, 1963, File #0457, Reel 40, Series XVI, Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, and “Election Procedures,” memorandum from the State Office in Jackson, October 25, 1963, File #0733, Reel 68, and Dona Richards and Oscar Chase to Maxwell Hahn, letter, fall 1963, File #0771-0772, Reel 70, Appendix A: MFDP Papers, and Miriam Cohen, “Field Report,” October 23-30, 1963, File # 0992-0993, Reel 5, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers; Sinsheimer, “The Freedom Vote of 1963,” 238; Dona Richards to L.D. Rayfield, letter, October 30, 1963, Box 3, Folder 4, Hunter R. Morey Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society; Rothschild, *Northern Volunteers and the Southern ‘Freedom Summers,’* 24; *The Texas Observer*, November 15, 1963, William Heath Papers; Dittmer, *Local People*, 205; Sinsheimer, “The Freedom Vote of 1963,” 240-241; Ed King, interview by James M. Mosby, May 28, 1970, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University.

<sup>33</sup> Estimates, however, range from 72,000 to 92,000.

<sup>34</sup> Sinsheimer, “The Freedom Vote of 1963,” 240-242; Dittmer, *Local People*, 206. SNCC’s strongholds in Leflore and Sunflower County reported only 1,500 and 300 votes (but Hattiesburg counted 3,500). Bolivar (Cleveland) and Washington (Greenville) counties reached 1,000. Some 13,000 votes came from Jackson and 30,000 from Coahoma, Panola, and Quitman counties combined.

significance. “We don’t expect to correct the evils of Mississippi by this snail’s-pace voting registration, but we do expect to build enough pressure to make it politically impossible for a federal government to remain so indifferent...We expect our efforts to dissuade those who believe that anything less than federal troops will work.” His speech represented the culmination of the lessons he learned throughout 1963: a permanent fusion of the local and the national, albeit on grassroots terms, was the only viable direction for the Mississippi movement. That night, Moses confirmed to *The Texas Observer*, discussions had begun about forming an insurgent local Democratic party that would send delegates to the Democratic National Convention in 1964.<sup>35</sup>

The Freedom Vote undoubtedly strengthened the Mississippi movement. Moses estimated that the number of locals willing to do voter registration work had grown tenfold. “Right now,” worker Frank Smith told national SNCC, “Mississippi is [the] best organized of any SNCC project...People are ready to move. A year ago [it took] 6 months to organize a town. Now we can do it in a month.” COFO had expanded into new areas like Issaquena and Leake Counties, and over sixty thousand Mississippi blacks had given their contact information. The election, Hollis Watkins observed, finalized the shift in the Mississippi movement “from the goals of individual freedom to those associated with collective advancement.”<sup>36</sup>

## 7.2. Above ‘The Race-Issue’

The Freedom Vote brought Moses new stature in the national and local civil rights movement because of his pivotal role in its realization. At a December COFO-meeting one participant acknowledged that Moses had “understood the long-term implications” of the mock election, whereas “much of the staff didn’t.” This again raises the question of how cosmopolitan activists influenced the movement’s direction. While Moses downplays his own importance, his ability to think in broader terms also shaped discussions over a new plan: the 1964 Mississippi Summer Project. This was another statewide project directed towards voter registration and building grassroots leadership aided by northern volunteers, albeit on a much larger scale.<sup>37</sup>

From the very first, Moses supported the concept of the 1964 summer project. Without it, he felt, “blacks were not going to get the vote fast enough to have significant impact as their numbers shrank.” Moreover, the staff could not go on indefinitely unless conditions changed. “[T]hey were already burnt-out [and] we didn’t...have any money [for any] support system.” Moses also pushed for the return of northern white volunteers. Preparing for a crucial COFO meeting in Greenville held between November 11-17 to discuss the plan, Moses outlined the crucial questions that needed to be decided: “1. what form should the organization of the Negro community in Mississippi take? What are the relative roles of COFO

<sup>35</sup> Committee to Elect Aaron Henry Governor, “A Petition Requesting Congress to investigate state-supported denial of constitutional rights in Mississippi, presented to US Congress November 25, 1963,” Box 1, Folder 20, Howard Zinn Papers; Sinsheimer, “The Freedom Vote of 1963,” 241-242; Ed King, interview by William Chafe, March 10, 1988, transcript, Allard Lowenstein Papers; *The Texas Observer*, November 15, 1963, William Heath Papers; Dittmer, *Local People*, 206. Governor Paul Johnson nonetheless incredibly maintained that blacks were not registered because they “haven’t made too much effort” and “had a great deal of confidence in the [state’s] white leadership.” (*The Texas Observer*, November 15, 1963, William Heath Papers)

<sup>36</sup> Sinsheimer, “The Freedom Vote of 1963,” 243; Dittmer, *Local People*, 207; Minutes meeting SNCC Washington Conference, no date, Box 1, Folder 21, Howard Zinn Papers; Hollis Watkins, interview by Robert Wright, August 5, 1968, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University; “Over 70,000 Cast Freedom Ballots,” *The Student Voice* 4, no. 4 (November 11, 1963): 1, 3, in *The Student Voice*, ed. Carson, 77, 80; King, *Freedom Song*, 240-241, 246-247; Frank Smith, “Re: First Congressional District,” field report, November 11, 1963, Files #0122-123, Reel 17, Series VII, Communications Department, Internal Communication, SNCC Papers.

<sup>37</sup> Aaron Henry, interview by Howard Zinn, December 28, 1965, transcript, Box 3, Folder 10, Howard Zinn Papers; “Minutes COFO-meeting December 15 [1963],” Files #0553-0558, Reel 42, Series XVII, Other Organizations, SNCC Papers.

and some form of political organization? Can we avoid a personality-centered organization?” and “2. How large a force of volunteer summer workers should we recruit? 100? 1,000? 2,000?”<sup>38</sup>

The realization of the Project became even more vital when Moses and Aaron Henry went to New York shortly before the meeting and Wiley Branton notified them that the VEP stopped financing voter registration programs in Mississippi. In a follow-up letter he explained that the cut-off “in no way” indicated “any lack of interest or appreciation for what you are doing,” but mere arithmetic: it spent most of its money on Mississippi but harvested the least results there<sup>39</sup>. Without VEP-money COFO could barely maintain the projects it had now, let alone cultivating its new areas. Lack of personnel already hampered the Hattiesburg and Canton projects, and in Greenwood morale continued to decline. The Freedom Vote had briefly suppressed its staff’s conflicts, but the disappointing turnout in Leflore County (only 1,500) revitalized frustrations. In a November 20 report Jane Stembridge, who had joined the Greenwood staff after two years of absence from SNCC, called the project’s state “one of sadness” in which staff was “destroying each other.” Sam Block was “telling [people] how much he doesn’t care about the movement,” she instanced. The Summer Project might alleviate such problems. Donations and volunteers could offset COFO’s financial problems. The ambitious program that was being formulated—ranging from establishing ‘parallel institutions’<sup>40</sup> like ‘freedom schools’ and community centers to voter registration and the creation of the new political party—could provide enough activity to divert people from unproductive in-fighting.<sup>41</sup>

At the Greenville meeting, however, the Summer Project encountered vocal opposition. Arriving a day late, Moses found that the COFO-staff, including his own girlfriend, had already rejected most of it. Of the thirty-five blacks and seven whites in attendance (mostly SNCC-workers), the Project’s strongest opponents—Charlie Cobb, Ivanhoe Donaldson, Hollis Watkins, Curtis Hayes, and Willie Peacock—were in the minority, as were those who favored the plan in its entirety, like Fannie Lou Hamer, Lawrence Guyot, and Moses himself. Yet the latter won the first of many battles toward its acceptance. This meeting is therefore instructive in revealing the pragmatics of group-centered leadership and Moses’ handling of it. The fact that he assumed an unusually vocal role in the discussions at Greenville indicates the strength of his conviction that this was the only viable direction for SNCC. Yet without downplaying his opponents’ views and overstating his own, Moses tried to coax the group into moving beyond their emotions by deploying pragmatic arguments and emphasizing their shared values. The debate thereby demonstrates

<sup>38</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 208; Bob Moses, “Memo to Mississippi Staff,” no date, William Heath Papers; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 73-74; Moses interview Carson, 1982.

<sup>39</sup> Branton additionally cited the Justice Department’s failure to protect voter registration applicants and obtain successful lawsuits, but COFO-workers suspected a third reason: the VEP’s financial backers no longer accepted their disregard for their stipulation not to use funds for “partisan politics in any manner whatsoever.” If the Freedom Vote counted as partisan politics, then forming a new party for the National Democratic Convention certainly did. (Wiley A. Branton to Aaron Henry and Bob Moses, letter, November 12, 1963, in *Debating the Civil Rights Movement*, Lawson and Payne, 88-89, see also File #0955, Reel 10, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers)

<sup>40</sup> At the Greenville meeting Moses advised his colleagues to institutionalize parallel projects—like its welfare system in Greenwood—as official aspects of COFO’s program. In 1966 he explained COFO’s evolving ‘theory of parallel institutions’ as follows: “[It means that] if you can’t get into the regular process, then set up something which is parallel to it and allows people to actually get themselves together and organized.” Later that week COFO indeed resolved to “develop its own structure...for servicing vital needs” like “a network of community centers [performing] functions ranging from pre-natal care to political education.” (Mendy Samstein, “Notes on Mississippi,” no date, 1963, report, Folder 1, Mendy Samstein Papers, and Robert Parris Moses, interview by Anne Romaine, September 1966/November 14, 1987, Anne Romaine Papers; Howard Zinn, “Notes on Mississippi Staff Meeting, Greenville, Nov. 14-16, 1963,” and partial typed minutes of the meeting, Box 2, Folder 10, Howard Zinn Papers)

<sup>41</sup> Wiley A. Branton to Aaron Henry and Bob Moses, letter, November 12, 1963, in *Debating the Civil Rights Movement*, Lawson and Payne, 88-89, see also File #0955, Reel 10, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers; Dittmer, *Local People*, 212-213; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 123; Jane Stembridge, “Field Report, Greenwood, Mississippi,” November 20, 1963, File #0123, Reel 17, Series VII, Communications Department, Internal Communications, SNCC Papers.

his consensus-building skills and underlines his broad understanding and penetrating intellect.<sup>42</sup>

Opposition to the Summer Project centered on the involvement of northern whites. "It's wrong for people outside Mississippi to come in," objected one COFO worker; it would be far better to train native Mississippians because they "have got to stay, after the [white] folks leave." Moses replied that SNCC was already doing this: "We shouldn't be accused of not training Mississippi people. We certainly tried. Not until last summer did the first white people come." Dona Richards questioned "the value of the publicity we gained from the Yale students," but Moses urged the group to consider the effect on the federal government: "We've got to think about the presidential campaign...what will the president's reaction be to 2,000 people in Mississippi?" He admitted that this would be dangerous; they had "to prepare to have several people killed." Douglas MacArthur Cotton complained that the presence of whites especially increased the danger to blacks. Lawrence Guyot countered that Cotton—like everyone in the room—was personally responsible for someone getting jailed or worse, too. This stung Moses: "I don't think that's fair—We [went] to work in McComb and we end up with a guy killed. Now we didn't know [that] when we started." As he had tried to do ever since Herbert Lee's death, he proposed to focus on the controllable things: "Let's start planning now—make certain people responsible for jobs they got to do." Charlie Cobb suggested recruiting 2,000 Northern or upper South black students instead of whites. Moses pointed out that few black students would be able to afford the trip, but agreed that each white student could fund a black one.

Resentment over the role of whites during the Freedom Vote resurfaced. Someone suggested that whites be restricted to "special projects," and not be allowed to "take over the office." Moses denied that they had done this: "We had a lot to do in Jackson. It was as simple as that. I wouldn't accept any blanket rule like that." He felt that the presence of whites did not necessarily undermine grassroots empowerment. "You have a problem of things to be done," he explained, "and you go ahead and see who can do what, and also train local people." That approach had failed during the mock election, Cobb countered, because whites had held leadership positions in the office. "[W]e needed experienced people in the field," Moses explained, "The decision was made on the basis of the needs of the campaign. There just weren't enough people—it wasn't that we weren't thinking about training people." Dona Richards reminded him of the whites who went to Yazoo City against his advice. That had not been the fault of the volunteers, Moses stated: Allard Lowenstein had "briefed them because *we* [did not say] who should brief them." To avoid such problems in the future, the staff listed the measures it had agreed upon the previous night: whites could not direct projects, write platforms, or operate the WATS-line. Moreover, they should be screened carefully, and work mainly in the white community.

Moses was stunned: "In other words, get rid of whites." Amid a chorus of denials, he persisted. "It seems to me that's the idea, if you're sending them to work in white communities." Richards emotionally called out her boyfriend: "That's the way *you* want to characterize it. Don't exaggerate it. They said no whites in certain leadership positions. They did not say no whites at all." Moses would have none of this. Cutting through the rationalizations, he addressed the issue of blacks' insecurity head-on: "People say if Negroes and whites work in the field, *they* are more articulate and *they're* going to do the talking. And then if you say put them in the office, they're better typists [and] you don't want them *there*. Then there's no place for them." When one worker complained that Mendy Samstein led a project, Moses urged the group to look beyond race and acknowledge the 'personhood' of every individual: "[T]here's a big difference between saying a white man's on the WATS-line and *Mendy's* on the WATS-line...I don't think

<sup>42</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 208-210; Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*, 186-189; Rothchild, *Northern Volunteers and the Southern 'Freedom Summers'* 26-29; Howard Zinn, "Notes on Mississippi Staff Meeting, Greenville, Nov. 14-16, 1963," and partial typed minutes of the meeting, Box 2, Folder 10, Howard Zinn Papers. See also its descriptions in Payne's *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, Burner's *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, Carson's *In Struggle*, and Cagin's and Dray's *We Are Not Afraid*. All quotes in subsequent paragraphs about the Greenville meeting were taken directly from Zinn's notes or the types minutes of the meeting, unless specifically indicated with a new footnote.

he's offensive [or] imposing on people [so] it's a dehumanizing statement to make." He deprecated the notion that "white people...took over and now we're gonna put them in their place" because "we spread generalizations that are a lie—that any Negro can talk to any other Negro because he is a Negro."

Moses' forcefulness unsettled the staff, and some resented it. Dona Richards—known as a "pretty high-powered intellectual" herself<sup>43</sup>—warned him that he was dominating the debate in a way that he claimed to abhor: "The tone gets to be all on one side, because after everyone speaks, you answer." Another attacked Moses' intellect: "You're perpetuating the idea of inferiority. YOU're taking the same attitude some white people take to us." Lawrence Guyot verbalized the staff's confusion: "You seem to have used logic now to change the entire tone of the conversation."

When asked to state his "pitch," Moses' reply represented an apt description of his personal world view and ability to see on the long-term. At the same time, he tried to fairly represent his opponents' views and present a conclusion that embodied a workable consensus:

My position all along [has been]: you try to get as many Negroes as you can to do the job [and] get white students in to the extent that it won't do harm to the Negro community...my feeling has been that the type of person you have is much more important than whether he's white or not, that some white people...can break down the depersonalization of people, that the Negroes would have to take them as people. They'd learn not to let their fears and emotions get the better of them when they talk to whites. These are the kind of people I look for when I go around and talk to people about coming down...I was also concerned that we do integrate it because otherwise we'll grow up and have a racist movement...if the white people don't stand with the Negroes, then there will be a danger that after [Negroes] get something they'll say, okay, we got this by ourselves. And the only way you can break that down is to have white people working alongside of you—so then it changes the whole complexion of what you're doing, so it isn't any longer Negro fighting white, it's a question of rational people against irrational people.

Several voiced agreement when he added: "The situation has to be looked at rationally. Who are the people we need? Who do we have?...The questions can't be couched in those terms—that no white person can be head of any project—that's a racist statement. I don't see how we can operate on that principle. We can, but I don't want to be part of an operation like that."

The issue of race, however, involved powerful emotions. "The first consciousness that Negroes have [is] of whiteness," Cobb explained, "It may be an irrational thing [but] you have to decide, is it practical...to have a white project director?" Ivanhoe Donaldson agreed: "I came into SNCC and saw Negroes running the movement and I felt good [although this] might be irrational." Issues of class also came into play. As Guyot later confessed, "It was a question not only of white against black but skill versus non-skill." Many SNCC-workers, he believed, would have felt equally uncomfortable with well-educated black volunteers: "It was about turf...you had people with us [who before joining] SNCC had led very ordinary lives. Now they were heroes. They were leaders." Curtis Hayes agreed: "[W]e knew more about Mississippi than [Northerners] did, but they had the ability to carry out these long analyses, intellectual discussions about our environment that seemed like foreign language." They feared that locals would "feel inferior and fall back into the same rut that they were in before we started the grassroots organizations." Perhaps, he speculated, their objections reflected "not really the black-white issue as much as...the north-south issue"<sup>44</sup>.

<sup>43</sup> Lisa Anderson Todd, interview by author, Washington DC, October 23, 2008.

<sup>44</sup> Lawrence Guyot, interview by Anne and Howard Romaine, November 23, 1966, transcript, Anne Romaine Papers; Lawrence Guyot, interview by John Rachal, September 7, 1996, and Hollis Watkins, interviews by John Rachal, October 23, 29, and 30, 1996, transcript, Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi Collection, University of Southern Mississippi; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 150-151.



Moses persisted in depicting resentments against whites as a weakness that SNCC needed to overcome. “The one thing we can do for the country that no one else can,” he stated, “is to be above the race issue.” Some older locals concurred. “If we’re trying to break down this barrier of segregation,” Fannie Lou Hamer said, “we can’t segregate ourselves.” The rest of the meeting then centered on staff admissions of irrationality and reflections on their significance. “I’m a product of this irrational society. I get irrational feelings,” Cobb said, but “I want to get away from all that stuff. And the question is *how?*” “Contact,” replied Howard Zinn. “The only way we can handle these irrational feelings,” another agreed, “is not to honor them.” The meeting then closed without a final vote for *or* against the project. Further discussions were postponed to COFO’s next meeting on December 15.

The fact that the plans survived owed much to Moses’ personality and reputation within SNCC. Staff members understood that if Moses—whose analyses so far had been proven correct—felt so strongly about the need for white participation that he regarded it as a resigning issue, then they would have to contemplate the possibility of a SNCC without its most respected figure. “Moses put himself and his political credibility with staff on the line,” Guyot emphasized in 1966. Thirteen years later he stated that the opponents changed their position “because of the collective respect that all of us had for Bob Moses.” Mendy Samstein agreed that “Bob was decisive...there’s no question. And probably, if there was a vote, maybe it would have gone the other way.” But it was not “that simple. There was a lot of back and forth discussion [so] it [can’t] be thought of as a cut-and-dried thing.” Moreover, forces outside the control of the staff were already recruiting whites. On November 23 Howard Zinn wrote Moses that a Michigan professor planned to send volunteers, and Allard Lowenstein announced recruitment plans in December. “[A]s an organizer,” Charlie Cobb recalled in 1996, “you recognized it as something that was underway. Your question no longer becomes...whether you are for it or against it, but how do you respond to the fact of it.”<sup>45</sup>

Moses nonetheless accelerated its acceptance. He had successfully bonded with uneducated Southern blacks, but his cosmopolitan background added weight to his words. Local activist Unita Blackwell noted the significance of having a black intellectual in their midst: “I had a good impression of a PhD. I didn’t even know what they were. But they used to throw it around a lot [that] Moses had [started] a PhD. And I thought it must have been [quite] something.” Trinidad-native Stokely Carmichael was even more exotic: “[He] would talk about the Islands, and he had an accent. And that would flavor us, and then he’d tell us about African people...you just would sit for hours and listen [to] Stokely.” Moses and Carmichael represented, Blackwell said, what black Mississippians truly desired and needed: information. Out-of-state workers rather than local stalwarts like Amzie Moore or Medgar Evers inspired Mississippi students, Dorie Ladner explained in 2009: “I was taught by James Bevel [and] Paul Brooks...[Medgar Evers] would tell us that ‘we wanna get our freedom someday’...I didn’t really know what it meant [but] when the Freedom Riders came in, they brought that whole thing together for us.” John Lewis, an Alabama native, agreed: “In many instances the people needed a spark...You needed someone like a Bob Moses to come in, the Freedom Riders.” Even Moses admitted that merely “my physical presence...as well as others from out of state, pried open this ‘closed society’ [and] contributed to folks’ growth.”<sup>46</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Mississippi’s ‘Freedom Summer’ Reviewed, conference October 30 - November 2, 1979, transcript, Session 7, Folder 6, Mississippi’s ‘Freedom Summer’ Reviewed Collection; Raines, *My Soul Is Rested*, 286-287; Greenberg, ed., *Circle of Trust*, 85; Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 11; Zinn to Moses, letter, November 23, 1963, File #1199, Reel 69, Appendix A: MFDP Papers, SNCC Papers; Charlie Cobb, interview by John Rachal, October 21, 1996, transcript, Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi Collection, University of Southern Mississippi.

<sup>46</sup> Unita Blackwell, interviews by Michael Garvey, April 21 and May 12, 1977, transcript, Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi Collection, University of Southern Mississippi; “Workshop Proposal,” no date 1964, Box 1, Folder 2, Stuart Ewen Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin; John Lewis, interview by author, and Dorie Ladner, interview by author, Washington DC, November 16, 2009; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 74-75. Yet the fact that workers with resources were present on a full-time basis was more important than whether they were outsiders, as

But at the December 15 COFO-meeting it became apparent that this had unintentional consequences as well. In Moses' absence, the staff "approved a summer project...without any recommendation about the number of participants." Dave Dennis proposed that further decisions be postponed until Moses could join the meeting. The reluctance to speak about the project without Moses was not only logical, given his position as Mississippi Director, but it also signaled the staff's acceptance of his broader arguments. Nevertheless, for the first time some staff members openly questioned whether such dependence hampered their own empowerment. One participant criticized the implication that "someone is indispensable here," meaning that in a participatory democracy no-one's presence or absence should determine agendas or outcomes. Even Lawrence Guyot stated that he was "mad because nobody's challenging Moses," although emphasizing that he was "attacking Moses as an institution not a person." Another staff member grumbled about "the Bob Moses mystique—we've operated as though the very word of God was being spoken." Further discussion was nonetheless postponed.<sup>47</sup>

The SNCC's Executive Committee meeting of December 27-31, 1963, rehearsed many of the arguments that had been debated in Greenville. James Forman, John Lewis, and Marion Barry stressed the Project's publicity value, arguing that SNCC had a unique opportunity to put pressure on President Johnson. Others, like Charlie Cobb and Ivanhoe Donaldson, restated their concerns about bloodshed and the effects of an "outside invasion" on local leadership. Moses, wary about seeming to dominate the debate as he had done in Greenville, matter-of-factly stated that his northern networks had told him that northern students were "organizing to come down. [So] SNCC has to decide whether to have a project [and] how many will be involved." Asking the group to make a decision because it was "too big a responsibility to make alone," he merely summarized the arguments for and against. Eventually national SNCC passed a motion that during 1964 it intended "to obtain the right for all citizens of Mississippi to vote, using as many people as necessary."<sup>48</sup>

During the following months Moses said he "travelled and talked about the need for the project," but he did not make a forceful case. His low-key presentations did not simply reflect, as Taylor Branch has claimed, his doubts about "charismatic leadership within a democratic movement." Rather, he was "trying...to hear what people were saying on both sides." For him it "was damned if you, damned if you don't." By not taking a public stance he therefore bought himself time to ponder its consequences. Despite his own nagging doubts, however, Moses remained convinced that the enlistment of white volunteers would strengthen rather than weaken local leadership. Ordinary black Mississippians *wanted* their return; Amzie Moore had been calling for outside help since 1960. "It was clear," Moses believed, "that if there was [a] vote put to the assembly of COFO...they would vote that the students come in." Dorie Ladner has made the point that outside help could hardly undermine grassroots leadership because in most places the latter did not exist. "We wanted everyone who would come, to come. Because we were just a tiny, tiny, tiny little drop against this whole establishment... All of us who were debating were local [but] we were not making any dent in the status quo." In April Moses clarified his thoughts in a speech at Stanford University that showcased his genuine faith in locals' perceptions: "[T]he people in Mississippi did not have the reaction of the staff [and] I think in many cases the instincts of the people...about these things are truer, deeper, less cluttered, less

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one black said about Lawrence Guyot, a Mississippian and Tougaloo graduate: "Guyot asked some of us did we want to go to a workshop? We didn't know what a workshop was. So he taken us to a workshop [and that's really] what made me want to stay in the movement. I was understanding some of these things [movement people] was talking about." (Ulysses Everett, interview by KZSU Radio Station Stanford University, 1965, transcript, KZSU Project South Interview Collection, Microfiche 2479 (E), Library of Congress, Washington DC)

<sup>47</sup> Minutes COFO Staff Executive Committee Meeting, January 10, 1964, James Forman Papers, Library of Congress; "Minutes COFO-meeting December 15 [1963]," Files #0553-0558, Reel 42, Series XVII, Other Organizations, SNCC Papers. See also Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 193.

<sup>48</sup> Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 75; "Minutes of the Meeting of the SNCC Executive Committee," December 27-31, 1963, Files #0313-0328, Reel 3, Executive and Central Committees, Executive Committee, SNCC Papers.

bothered by personal problems...then the instincts of the staff." The debate therefore demonstrated "the distinctively different perspectives of organizer and community leader."<sup>49</sup>

Five days after the Greenville meeting, a sniper's bullet in Dallas complicated SNCC's plans as well. President Kennedy's death shook field workers' morale: if the *President* could be killed "then so could *they*." Moses' first reaction was similar: "Well, nobody's safe." At its biannual conference at Howard University in the Thanksgiving weekend of November 29-December 1, SNCC tried "to get the lie of the land politically now." Moses considered this more important than joining the public outpouring of remorse that swept the nation, which he felt overshadowed genuine criticisms of the administration. "The conference may be the one place...where people can get together and talk about something that can be meaningful for the whole country without having to pay homage[,] which is trivial," he told Mary King. "It just doesn't seem that anywhere in the country we have a counter-balance to the idea that if a President dies, he was a hero...So if there are any real issues at the bottom of this [death] we must cover them up...And see, SNCC doesn't have to go through that."<sup>50</sup>

The staff was unsure what Kennedy's death meant for the movement. Some felt it might serve as a unifying force that could accelerate civil rights legislation; others feared that the murder, rumored to be a Communist plot, might trigger a renewal of McCarthyism. Kennedy's successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, inspired little confidence. Although he had steered the 1957 Civil Rights Act through Congress, Johnson was not a civil rights liberal. Moreover, he instantly reached out to the traditional middle-class national black leadership. In his first days as President he met Martin Luther King, Roy Wilkins, James Farmer, Whitney Young, and A. Philip Randolph,<sup>51</sup> but Johnson's failure to invite John Lewis to the White House "caused a lot of grumbling and complaining" among the SNCC-workers. When other civil rights groups agreed to stop demonstrations in order to allow Johnson some breathing space, SNCC refused.<sup>52, 53</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Moses interview Biewen, *American Radio Works*, 1994; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 74-75; Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 194; Moses interview Carson, 1982; Howard Zinn, "Notes on Mississippi Staff Meeting, Greenville, Nov. 14-16, 1963" and partial typed minutes of the meeting, Box 2, Folder 10, Howard Zinn Papers; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Anne Romaine, September 1966/November 14, 1987, Anne Romaine Papers; Dorie Ladner, interview by author, Washington DC, November 16, 2009; Bob Moses, "Speech," (West Coast Civil Rights Conference, April 23, 1964), transcript, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, University of Southern Mississippi.

<sup>50</sup> Moses interview Biewen, *American Radio Works*, 1994; Lewis and D'Orso, *Walking With the Wind*, 245-247; Hand written notes Taylor Branch, January 16, 1999, Box 108, Folder 3, Taylor Branch Papers; King, *Freedom Song*, 242-243; Mary King to James Forman, memorandum, November 25, 1963, Box 3, Folder 5, Mary King Papers.

<sup>51</sup> The five represented "everyone I could think of," President Johnson revealed in a telephone conversation. He insisted that federal civil rights legislation was his top priority, but his orders to "get King and Farmer and Randolph to tell [critics] that everyone had their picture made" and that he was "the first President who just went out of my way to have...coffee, and sit down and talk to them" betrayed his ineptness in dealing with the black community. He even privately admitted that he did not know "what more I can do." (Michael R. Beschloss, ed., *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 28-30, 128-130)

<sup>52</sup> "We would be derelict in our duty to our people and to President Johnson if we had a moratorium," James Forman explained at the conference, "Where Mr. Kennedy because of his record and past actions in the civil rights field, might have slipped by with words and promises, Mr. Johnson, being a Texan, will have to prove himself to Negroes and liberals by his actions." Most non-SNCC conference participants, like James Baldwin, agreed but their tones were more conciliatory. Rustin proclaimed that "Johnson may be able to control the South better than Mr. Kennedy did...[b]ecause he represents things [Southern whites] want. SNCC must help Mr. Johnson [by creating] an atmosphere in which he is pushed even further." John Lewis advocated a nationwide movement: "We must speak to the whole nation. Negro and white students from the North must go into the black areas of the North [and] organize a mass movement similar to what we have in the South...if any basic changes are to take place now, we, the people, the masses, must rise up...We cannot depend on or expect President Johnson or Congress to do it, but we must help them do it." ("Over 300 Attend SNCC Conference," in *The Student Voice* 4, no. 7 (December 9, 1963): 2, 4)

<sup>53</sup> Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 174-179; Michael R. Beschloss, ed., *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 28-30, 128-130; Lewis and D'Orso, *Walking With The Wind*, 246.

Moses did not refer to Johnson or Kennedy in his speech to the SNCC conference. Instead, he stressed the federal government's significance for the movement. Rebutting a recent *Life*-article by Theodore White that accused the civil rights movement of "blackmail[ing] the federal government," Moses dwelt on the need to "change the political structure of the South as we now know it." He explained SNCC's purpose for 1964 through Leslie Dunbar's 'Annealing the South'-metaphor: "[T]he South & the country doesn't change unless its heated up to a white hot heat first, and then while it's in the process of cooling off, it's possible to [mold it and] make some changes." This meant creating a situation which forced a confrontation between federal and state authorities: "[T]he Deep South will not change...until the federal government makes it change." As in Greenville, he tried to guide his fellow-workers into seeing the broader picture rather than just attacking injustice. He urged them to understand that creating this confrontation was essentially "what we are trying to do" and that "it's not a lunatic move" because the current situation "is a national crisis." The current two-party system needed to be destroyed, he argued, because "any political administration in this country in order to bring about real change...must in effect put itself out of office because...they have to alienate a considerable number of their support [and] no administration is ready to do this." Attacking the power structure at its roots was a point, *The Nation* stated, "[n]one of the [other] SNCC leadership itself spoke to," since most "lack the education or background...to see their problems in a larger context."<sup>54</sup>

Moses' erudition and cosmopolitan background were on full display. He juxtaposed Plato and Ulysses, quoted Camus, and urged his colleagues to face the issue of civil liberties. Attacking the still lingering McCarthyism, he stated, was "the next frontier." Moses was still one of the few in SNCC who habitually pushed this question. He had recently asked the National Student Association to sponsor an "open discussion on the relation between civil liberties and social movements" because communist charges kept "liberal white Southerners on the defensive." At the conference he therefore urged SNCC to make its 'non-exclusion'-policy explicit: "[W]e have to throw what little weight we have on the side of free association." Rather than excluding people because of their "past political associations," SNCC should welcome help from all who shared its goals and principles. He wanted all SNCC-workers to have a "manual on basic civil liberties questions," which he asked the Provisional Student Civil Liberties Coordinating Committee to compile. At SNCC's December meeting he also advocated that SNCC called for the abolition of HUAC. When colleagues resisted, Moses tried to find a practical compromise: "We should...take a position, and close behind it. [The real disagreement is] between a principled position that political association is never relevant even when it causes turmoil, and a pragmatic one that it would have occasional relevance...What we need is a criterion of flexibility without a flat statement one way or the other." SNCC then agreed to adopt "a position of non-alignment"—that is, "of no political test for members"—but not to state this openly.<sup>55</sup>

Moses' views on economic disparities also separated him from his colleagues. Many SNCC-workers shunned the workshops that labor representatives from the AFL-CIO conducted during the conference—even though unions had helped to finance the meeting. Some on the SNCC-staff, like Tim Jenkins and Bill Mahoney, had forged bonds with the labor movement. Most, however, were skeptical or indifferent, which *The Nation* again blamed on the workers' limited backgrounds. Next to Howard University's NAG-group, Julian Bond concurred in 2008, James Forman stood out in SNCC for knowing "labor history [and] people in those movements who could tell us what somebody else had tried...But most of us didn't." It was more than a matter of ignorance, however. Most unions had a well-attested

<sup>54</sup> "Bob Moses Talk at SNCC's Washington Conference," November 30, 1963, Box 4, Folder 12, Staughton Lynd Papers; Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 165; *The Nation*, January 6, 1964, 30-33, Box 1, Folder 7, Howard Zinn Papers.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*; Robert Moses, "Civil Rights and Civil Liberties," memorandum, no date, Box M85-587, Folder 3, Pamela P. Allen Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin; Paul Goodberg (Director PSCCLC) to Bob Moses, letters, December 3 and 6, 1963, Files #1129, Reel 70, and File #1200, Reel 69, Appendix A: MFDP Papers, SNCC Papers; "Minutes of the Meeting of the SNCC Executive Committee," December 27-31, 1963, Files #0313-0328, Reel 3, Series II, Executive and Central Committees, Executive Committee, SNCC Papers; Carson, *In Struggle*, 106-107.

history of racial discrimination, and had sometimes excluded blacks altogether. At one meeting with union leaders, SNCC-workers openly chastised labor for its segregated local affiliates. They also expressed fears that financial contributions—like at the March on Washington—meant “control of our policy.”<sup>56</sup>

Economics nonetheless comprised a major part of SNCC’s December 27-31 meeting. This reflected its changed direction after three years of working with the black poor. Racial equality, SNCC began to realize, would mean little if gross economic inequality persisted. Moreover, the economic question forced national SNCC to clarify its overall goals in a way it hitherto had avoided. As Howard Zinn observed: “Is SNCC a Southern movement, and if so which South? Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia are not Nashville...we have to [answer questions like] What is our economic and political goal? What kind of revolution do we want?” Moses answered that challenge from his faith in grassroots initiatives. He outlined COFO’s “experimental programs” such as its commodities drive. He pointed to a self-help project in Ruleville where local women sold quilts and to getting government programs into Mississippi to retrain unskilled laborers. Charles Sherrod likewise stated that Georgia SNCC was helping the Koinonia<sup>57</sup> community to take over a pecan factory.<sup>58</sup>

Several NAG-members attacked Moses and Sherrod for their projects’ limited scopes. Instead of engaging in futile attempts to prop up the ailing rural economy, they argued, SNCC should “take all the Negroes from the rural areas into the cities and force the revolution. Hungry people need to be massed to turn over the government...Don’t fight automation.” Moses replied in a calm, pragmatic way: “[W]e don’t know what terms such as ‘revolution’ and ‘revamp the economy’ mean. We need to take time out from action and study with some up-to-date people...It may be that no one knows the answers to the technological revolution in which we are caught.” He advocated the same slow approach to economics as to voter registration: “The only way...is to organize the unemployed and sit on their doorsteps. We need to work on several different levels[:] education of staff on economic organization [and simultaneously] continue with programs of mass action, organizing people, development of leadership.” SNCC agreed “to develop a formal program of economic education for its staff,” as well as to follow Moses’ example in politics. Greenwood, John Lewis reported afterward, represented “what we would like to accomplish in our other projects.” SNCC’s Executive Committee accordingly approved the idea to “run [Negro] candidates in all areas where we work.”<sup>59</sup>

### 7.3. Full Circle

After the Greenville meeting, Moses left Mississippi for over a month. Between the Thanksgiving conference and the Atlanta meeting he returned to New York where he met National Council of Churches-officials, discussed a “training program in literacy work” with John Blyth, and contacted the Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited (HARYOU) about its educational and employment programs. At Moses’ request, he, Ella Baker, and Charles Sherrod attended HARYOU’s January 3-4 meetings, because he wanted to explore “whether such a youth program might not be possible for Southern urban areas.” This underscores Moses’ nonstop preoccupation with bridging the North and the South. In April he repeated his belief that changing Congress through his Southern work might alleviate the explosive situation in Northern

<sup>56</sup> *The Nation*, January 6, 1964, 30-33, Box 1, Folder 7, Howard Zinn Papers; Julian Bond, interview by author, Washington DC, October 27, 2008; Carson, *In Struggle*, 103-104; Report on Meeting With Union Leaders,” December 2, 1963, File #0011, Reel 59, Series III, Other Organizations, Washington Office, SNCC Papers.

<sup>57</sup> Koinonia Farm, near Americus, GA, is a religious community that serves as a social service organization. During the 1960s it housed, fed, and stimulated civil rights workers; SNCC-workers in particular. It later became the birth ground for Habitat for Humanity.

<sup>58</sup> “Minutes of the Meeting of the SNCC Executive Committee,” December 27-31, 1963, Files #0313-0328, Reel 3, Series II, Executive and Central Committees, Executive Committee, SNCC Papers.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*; John Lewis, “Sixth Month Report,” December 27, 1963, Files #0009-0011, Reel 2, Series I, Chairman Files John Lewis, SNCC Papers.

ghettos: “[T]he preconditions for [Negro acts of terror] already exist [because] people have been blocking effective legislation in the Congress which would be able to deal with some of the serious problems we have in our cities.” Job problems were inextricably tied to school and housing problems. Trouble would therefore continue until local, state, and federal authorities created agencies that could “deal with those three problems conceived as a unit.” With this sharp analysis, he predicted the severe riots that erupted in Harlem three months later—the first of many nationwide in subsequent years.<sup>60</sup>

While in New York Moses married Dona Richards. Martin Luther King wired the couple on December 23, wishing them “a happy and long life” and calling their movement contributions “an inspiration to generations yet unborn.” The reactions among staff members in Mississippi, however, were sometimes churlish. Mary King claimed that Richards was “almost ostracized...because of her desire for independence within the marriage,” including keeping her maiden name. Jealousy played another role. As Julian Bond stated in 2008, “Everyone wanted to marry Bob.” Such feelings were not always romantic, Dorie Ladner explained in 2009: “[The marriage] made us angry. Because we had had Bob all to ourselves... he was like my big brother...We didn’t want to share him.” Dave Dennis agreed: “They thought they were some part of Bob. In Mississippi males and females did...People felt that she had come in and taken Bob away.” Moreover, Bond and Dennis claimed that the marriage gave Richards “extra status [and a] bigger role in meetings,” which likely aggravated the jealousy.<sup>61</sup>

For the newlyweds this was not easy. Like Moses, Richards felt conflicted about being thrust into prominence. Separating marriage and movement life made matters even more difficult; their first home in Hattiesburg even functioned as an extension of the SNCC-office. Moses had occasionally discussed this with his fellow-activists: “If we’re going to have families [and] different kind of jobs...can SNCC evolve in a way to accommodate those demands?” In practice the answer was often no, which increased resentment against the marriage. Even Dennis complained that after the marriage Moses and Richards “isolated themselves a lot.” He recalled in 2010 he once came to the couple’s second home in Jackson to discuss movement business, but “Bob sent me on this porch...because Dona did not want to have the movement come into her house [anymore] so I left because I wasn’t going to sit out there!” Others complained that “Moses used to be on time, but not since he got married” and that “his mail was generally unopened.” Despite their marriage, however, Richards did not withdraw her opposition to a summer project that utilized white volunteers.<sup>62</sup>

An COFO Executive Committee meeting on January 10 revealed that concerns about the Summer Project were still much alive among other SNCC-workers too. Moses repeated his argument that a national strategy would complement and strengthen local leadership. “The general situation here is that of absolute resistance on the part of the State of Mississippi,” he pointed out, “we need external and internal pressure to break it. We need to organize the Negro community [so they are] carried along with the momentum.” He then listed the programs the Project could sponsor and suggested ways of organizing them. Others raised the same old objections: it was too ambitious, too dangerous, and whites would take

<sup>60</sup> “Minutes of the Meeting of the SNCC Executive Committee,” December 27-31, 1963, Files #0313-0328, Reel 3, Series II, Executive and Central Committees, Executive Committee, SNCC Papers; Bob Moses, “Speech,” (West Coast Civil Rights Conference, April 23, 1964), transcript, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, University of Southern Mississippi, Jackson, MS.

<sup>61</sup> Mendy Samstein, interview by Anne Romaine, September 4, 1966, Anne Romaine Papers; Hand written notes Taylor Branch, March 13, 1988 and Martin Luther King to Bob and Dona, telegram, December 23, 1963, Box 108, Folder 3, Taylor Branch Papers; King, *Freedom Song*, 463; Dave Dennis, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 17, 2010; Dorie Ladner, interview by author, Washington DC, November 16, 2009; Julian Bond, email interview by author, December 4, 2008. Moses told Taylor Branch in 1988 he had never received King’s telegram.

<sup>62</sup> Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*, 103; Blake, *Children of the Movement*, 41; Paul Lauter, conversation with author at the Collegium for African-American Research conference in Bremen, Germany, March 25-29, 2009; Minutes SNCC meeting January 24, 1963, James Forman Papers, Library of Congress; Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?* 88; Rachele to Gail Hershberger, letter, January 4, 1963, File #0440, Reel 63, Appendix A: MFDP Papers, SNCC Papers.



over. Moses acknowledged their concerns, but reassured everyone that in any Project “[w]e argue things through until there is a consensus.”<sup>63</sup>

By an informal vote, COFO accepted the proposal to deploy “1,000 participants with no restriction on the number of white participants.” The fact that half of those present abstained, however, showed that support for the project did not approximate a genuine consensus. Charles Cobb, for example, stated that he favored the Project’s “educational angle [but] can’t stomach the idea of large numbers of Northern whites.” When discussions continued on January 24 opponents restated their skepticism. The staff has been forced into [the] summer project,” one said; “we cannot handle 1,000,” stated another, warning that it “might sink the [entire] Mississippi Project.” SNCC-worker Mike Sayer deplored “the exaggerated focus on Washington. Do revolutions get organized from outside anywhere? We must organize from within the state.” Supporters, including Charles Sherrod and Ella Baker, cited specific programs they liked or sheer pragmatics: “We voted to set up machinery, therefore we are committed.” The meeting once more ended undecided.<sup>64</sup>

Moses was not present on January 24: he was in jail in Hattiesburg in Forrest County, where demonstrations again showed that outside involvement could achieve national awareness without having to preclude grassroots agency. Compared to the Delta the county was relatively progressive, although only 12 out of 7,406 voting-age blacks were registered in 1961. In his career as registrar Theron Lynd accepted 1,836 whites and no blacks. Following Moses’ suggestion of a mass voting drive<sup>65</sup> the Hattiesburg COFO-staff planned a Selma-like Freedom Day on January 22. Movement stalwarts like Ella Baker, James Forman, John Lewis, Aaron Henry, Charles Evers, Annelle Ponder, and Dave Dennis came in. National news crews followed the arrival of fifty clergymen of the National Council of Churches’ United Presbyterian Commission on Religion and Race, the Episcopal Society for Cultural and Racial Unity, the Rabbinical Association of America, and the Presbyterian Interracial Council. At the Thanksgiving conference New York Rev. Robert Stone had approached Moses. Inquiring whether northern clergy could help in Mississippi, he had sent him to Lawrence Guyot, Hattiesburg’s project manager. The involvement of northern white clergy crystallized Bob Spike’s post-March on Washington plans to seek a theater to “bear witness” to southern racial atrocities and thereby bring extra force to their lobbying demands in Midwestern states for a new civil rights bill.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>63</sup> “Minutes of the COFO Staff Executive Committee Meeting,” January 10, 1964, James Forman Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.; “Minutes of Meeting, January 24, 1964” in Hattiesburg, “Minutes of Committee on Student Summer Project Meeting,” January 13, 1964, and “Plans and Procedures for Summer Project,” memorandum from Summer Project Committee to COFO Executive Committee, January 17, 1964, James Forman Papers, Library of Congress; Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 220-221.

<sup>65</sup> At the November 1963 meeting in Greenville Moses contemplated out loud that “it would be interesting to get 1,000 people to Hattiesburg.” He had recommended a mass-based voting drive there since August because its voter registrar, Theron Lynd, just appealed his Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals conviction ordering him to cease his discriminatory practices. Because the conviction was “going to test things throughout the state,” Moses thought it “interesting to see if we confuse that Hattiesburg situation [what the Justice Department is] going to do...because there they can say they’re moving to protect the court order.” (Dittmer, *Local People*, 184; Howard Zinn, “Notes on Mississippi Staff Meeting, Greenville, Nov. 14-16, 1963,” and partial typed minutes of the meeting, Box 2, Folder 10, Howard Zinn Papers)

<sup>66</sup> “150 Try to Register” and “Hattiesburg Fact Sheet,” *The Student Voice* 5, no. 2 (January 20, 1964); 1, 3, 4, in *The Student Voice*, ed. Carson, 105, 107-108; Dittmer, *Local People*, 179-180; Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*, 111-112; Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 179, 214-220; “Minutes of the COFO Convention,” February 9, 1964, James Forman Papers, Library of Congress. “[All Mississippi] registrars are looking,” Mendy Samstein documented the significance of the Hattiesburg Freedom Day beforehand, “[I]f Lynd has nothing to fear from the Justice Department...than neither would they. [By a showdown] it is hoped that we can force...the government to put up or shut up.” (Mendy Samstein, “On the Hattiesburg Situation,” report, no date (likely January 1964), File #0551, Reel 38, Series XV, State Project Files, SNCC Papers)

The large-scale involvement of white clergy made the campaign an unprecedented event in movement history. Moreover, by converging local and national movement needs it represented a logical move in between the Freedom Vote and the Summer Project. It was recognized as such at the time too, one worker reported: “[I]t is considered, in COFO, as one of the important first steps toward launching the full 1964 program.” On January 17 Moses likewise argued that “a full-blown effort in Hattiesburg” could function as a preamble to the Summer Project: “[W]e have to have both—a local fuss to justify major invasion from outside.” If successful it could have long-term implications, he believed: “[I]f we gain the right to picket in integrated picket lines then labor unions will [too].” They might “move into Mississippi [and] then...a whole host of other organizations [might] get to working people in Mississippi” as well.<sup>67</sup>

On the morning of January 22, 200 protesters gathered before the courthouse and auxiliary police. Yet to the crowd’s confusion, the latter announced that they could register. This not only kept the Justice Department at bay, but Greenwood and Birmingham had taught city officials that their battle was won in the media, not on the streets. The press did not respond to citations of injustice but only to “blood and guts,” as one *New York Times*-reporter brazenly admitted. Moses attributed this behavioral change to the presence of the white clergy: “Certainly we could not have maintained our picket line... without their acting as an out-of-state buffer.” Local officials, however, simply moved their tactics indoors: Lynd stalled registration by allowing only one applicant at the time. But police could not ignore Moses, who ordered him to move from the sidewalk opposite the demonstration. Moses left to consult with his colleagues<sup>68</sup> and returned with a picket sign to accompany two registrants towards the courthouse. The officer—ironically named John Quincy Adams—arrested him for “breach of peace” and “interfering with an officer.” When nearby FBI-officers merely wrote down his complaint, Moses, citing Section 242 of Title 18 of the U.S. Code, declared a citizen’s arrest of Adams instead. Held on a \$600 bail, Moses wired Burke Marshall, demanding a civil suit against Adams and “an injunction against Hattiesburg officials, prohibiting them from interfering with voter registration activity.” He was nonetheless put on trial, found guilty, and sentenced to sixty days and a \$200 fine<sup>69</sup>. On January 29 the National Council of Churches paid Moses’ bail through a property bond and he rejoined the Hattiesburg staff.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>67</sup> “Comments on the Hattiesburg Freedom Day,” by Mike Miller, no date (likely January 1964), File #0551, Reel 38, State Project Files, SNCC Papers; “Notes on Staff Executive Meeting,” January 17, 1964, James Forman Papers, Library of Congress; Bob Moses, “Speech,” (West Coast Civil Rights Conference, April 23, 1964), transcript, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, University of Southern Mississippi, Jackson, MS.

<sup>68</sup> Minutes of meetings centered on the Freedom Day reveal that Moses’ arrest had been approved by SNCC beforehand. On January 17 SNCC accepted Moses’ and Dennis’ suggestions to keep key staff out of jail “to direct the community and the incoming staff” but to prepare for the arrests of others. Moses even advised to “[c]ollect books for students [so] they don’t fall behind in school.” A group, including Moses and Richards, was comprised that could stay in Hattiesburg for an extended period of time. Two days after their arrival in Hattiesburg on January 19 they decided who should avoid arrests (Lawrence Guyot, Dona Richards, and five others) and who would not (Jesse Harris, Douglas McArthur Cotton, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Moses). Richards then packed items needed in jail and Moses wired Robert Kennedy demanding prosecution of arresting officers. (“Minutes of the COFO Staff Executive Committee Meeting,” January 10, 1964, and “Notes on Staff Executive Meeting,” January 17, 1964, James Forman Papers, Library of Congress; Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*, 104)

<sup>69</sup> The conviction followed what one observer called “the most fierce, pounding cross-examination I had ever seen.” Moses stayed his usual calm self and softly corrected the prosecuting attorney’s pronunciation and assumptions. When the attorney derisively asked which law school he attended to justify disobeying Adams, Moses coolly answered: “[T]he First Amendment...That’s the whole point of a democracy, that the citizens...don’t have to go to law school to know what their rights are.” Such bravery again enlarged his reputation among the present movement workers and clergymen. He spent his jail-time rereading Camus and continuing his work as Mississippi Director by discussing details of COFO-projects with visiting SNCC-workers. He even ordered Sam Block to “send in a report of what he is doing [and] a budget.” (Dittmer, *Local People*, 221; Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 224; Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*, 114, 119-121; “Hattiesburg, Mississippi,” report, January 27, 1964, File #0203, Reel 15, Series VII, Communications Department, Internal Communications, SNCC Papers)

<sup>70</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 220-221; Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 214-224, Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*, 102-122; Howard

With one arrest Freedom Day ended as a “quiet victory,” so COFO decided to create a perpetual picket line. For another week locals and clergymen marched daily, leading to 150 registration attempts. COFO duplicated Freedom Days in Canton, Greenwood, and Liberty, and SNCC in Georgia. Some 100-350 locals showed up, but police avoided public disturbances and generally retaliated behind-the-scenes<sup>71</sup>. Bored reporters then soon failed to show up. Despite temporary boosts in local activity, the Freedom Days barely led to more registrants (in Hattiesburg 200 out of 850 blacks had registered by May 26) but they taught COFO again that white outsiders brought protection for local blacks, bolstered their commitment, and enticed the nation. The NCC, converted through the experiences of its clergymen, vowed massive support for the Summer Project. This gave its proponents new ammunition, although they repeatedly stated that “COFO can call on outside help only if the local community is already moving.”<sup>72</sup>

On January 31 staff discussions on the Project again ended unresolved. Moses observed how the group “applauded with equal enthusiasm two rousing speeches advocating opposite courses.” He said little else because “I was still trying to come to grips in my own mind with all the implications.” But that evening events in McComb taught the implications of *not* doing it: Louis Allen was murdered with three shots to the head—hours before he was to leave Mississippi permanently. Since telling the truth about Herbert Lee he had suffered economic intimidations; Sheriff Daniel Jones had broken his jaw; the police had (falsely) arrested him for carrying a concealed weapon and for passing bad checks, and tried to frame him for domestic violence. His sons once stood guard all night because a lynch mob formed outside his jail cell. In October 1961 he even went into hiding after rumors that then-Sheriff E.L. Caston had instigated a plot to kill him. A week before his murder, one of his sons had his car fired on. In subsequent weeks Jones forced another six locals connected to the Lee and Allen cases to leave town.<sup>73</sup>

The news reached Moses the next morning by telephone. But, a report noted, “he wouldn’t get out of the bed to see what we were talking about...until he got ready.” The news was likely too distressing as guilt about Lee’s and Allen’s fate resurfaced. He had not seen the Allens since July 1962. It still upset Moses in 1984 to read widow Elizabeth Allen’s statement “that he didn’t help and see more of” her husband. He drove to McComb to collect witness testimonies. Meanwhile Sheriff Jones denied to *The Enterprise-Journal* that “the Negro-white question [was] a ruling factor” in Allen’s death, claiming that its cause would rather be found in Allen’s alleged criminal past. At Burke Marshall’s request the FBI

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Zinn, “Incident in Hattiesburg,” in *The Nation*, May 18, 1964; Bob Moses to George Meaney, letter, May 1, 1964, Files #0801-0803, Reel 70, Appendix A: MFDP Papers, and COFO, “Hattiesburg Report,” no date, and “Information from Atlanta Georgia via Walter Tillow,” no date, Files #0758, Reel 38, and File #0202, Reel 39, Series XV, State Project Files, and “Messages From Jackson” and “Hattiesburg,” January 22, 1964, File #0191, Reel 15, Series VII, Communications Department, Internal Communications, SNCC Papers; “150 Try to Register,” *The Student Voice* 5, no. 2 (January 20, 1964); 1, 3, in *The Student Voice*, ed. Carson, 105, 107.

<sup>71</sup> During the Greenwood Freedom Day chemicals placed on the courthouse radiators forced nauseated registrants to leave and according to *The Student Voice* of February 11 and 25, police retaliated against COFO-workers in Canton behind-the-scenes too. Their harassment, SNCC headquarters noted, constituted a “purge, since virtually all [COFO] workers who have gone into the city have been arrested, one by one.” Locals were harassed too. Police beat a black protestor and on January 30 “halted all Negro taxicabs claiming their permits were faulty.”

<sup>72</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 221-224; Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 219-220; “City of Hattiesburg vs. Robert Moses et al.,” injunction, January 29, 1964, and “Supplement to Hattiesburg Report of 31 January, 1964,” no date (likely February 1964), File #0603, Reel 23, and File #0572, Reel 21, Series VIII, Research Department, and COFO, “Hattiesburg Report,” no date, File #0758, Reel 38, Series XV, State Project Files, SNCC Papers; King, *Freedom Song*, 330-331; “Minutes of COFO Convention,” February 9, 1964, James Forman Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>73</sup> Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 221-223; Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 354-355; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 75-76; Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 299-300; “Mississippi Negro Witnessed Slaying; Shotgunned to Death,” New Release, February 2, 1964, File #0096, Reel 14, Series VII, Communications Department, Public Relations, and “Further Incidents in Southwest Mississippi at Time of Louis Allen Killing and Shortly After,” report, no date, File #0502, and Robert Moses, “Report Concerning the Louis Allen Case,” no date (likely February 1964), Files #0497-0499, Reel 20, Series VIII, Research Department, SNCC Papers.

investigated the murder, but its agents, accepting Jones' explanations, dismissed the case. The murder is still unsolved today, but the FBI admitted in 2011 that Sheriff Jones may well have been responsible.<sup>74</sup>

Moses contemplated the Summer Project as he drove back to Hattiesburg on February 2. Seeing Allen's widow, he recounted in the 1980s, made him realize "that we couldn't protect our own people." "[It] seemed to me like we were just sitting ducks," he verbalized his disbelief, "There was no real reason to kill him...they just came right up to his house [and] gunned him right down." While driving, he recalled, "it became clear that we had to do something, something big, that would really open the situation up. Otherwise they'd simply continue to kill the best among us." It felt like being back in 1961: "For me, it was as if everything had come full circle." But 1964 was different, he reasoned: "[Y]ou're back where you started but you're in a different place...you've got this whole national ferment now[,] networks in place[,] potential strategies lined up [and] some sort of opening to look at in terms of how can we respond."<sup>75</sup>

Allen's death upset other SNCC-workers too, but few, Bond recollected in 2008, realized then "how moved [Moses] was" about it. Unlike most, "Bob felt responsibility for it...if he had not done what he did these people would not be killed." His desire to do something, however, represented more than his personal, Camus-inspired guilt. It was also an extension of his ongoing effort to publicize the recent string of atrocities against blacks, which had reached new heights during the winter as the proximity of a new Civil Rights Act loomed near. The KKK accelerated its terror, as it had announced in an ominous leaflet: "The Ku Klux Klan is now awake from a thirty-five year sleep...where they see the sores of the communist-led Negro, vice and crime erupting on the people of this nation they will return, and by sinister means they will heal and bind the sore." This acceleration, one historian explained, emerged from frustration over losing white supremacy and its impatience with the Citizens Councils' ability to destroy the movement. Within days of President Kennedy's death, five black bodies were found near Natchez. Moses reported these to SNCC headquarters, but only *The New York Times'* Claude Sitton responded. Moreover, Moses told headquarters, Natchez' black community "is withdrawn, fearful, and silent. Don't even bother to try to find someone for attribution for a quotation." In *The New Yorker* he claimed 175 "cross burnings in southwest Mississippi and adjoining counties of Louisiana since the March on Washington." Shootings and bombings of black churches, businesses, and homes became commonplace as 1964 commenced. In Amite and Pike County six black businesses and two homes were bombed and three blacks were found dead in their car<sup>76</sup>. Allen's death, Moses reasoned, was just "the latest in [this] string of murders—lynchings."<sup>77</sup>

Moses investigated atrocities in southwest Mississippi throughout February, including the KKK's whipping of Natchez voter registration leader Archie Curtis, the murder of black Clifford Walker, and

<sup>74</sup> "McComb, Mississippi," report, February 1, 1964, Files #1143-1146, Reel 16, Series VII, Communications Department, Internal Communications, and Charles Gordon, "Ambush Killing of Negro, 44, Puzzles Amite Officers," *The Enterprise-Journal*, February 2, 1964, Files #0499-0501, Reel 20, Series VIII, Research Department, SNCC Papers; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, July 30, 1984, Box 108, Folder 3, and FBI Assistant Director A. Belmont to A. Rosen, memorandum, February 3, 1964, Box 106, Taylor Branch Papers; *60 Minutes*, "Cold Case: The Murder of Louis Allen," April 7, 2011. In several history books it is noted (based on Moses' own memory) that the news of Allen's death reached Moses during the Hattiesburg meeting, but since his body was found way past midnight, the version of the SNCC report, written on February 1, seems more trustworthy.

<sup>75</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, July 30, 1984, Taylor Branch Papers; Moses interview Dittmer, 1983; Moses interview Biewen, American Radio Works, 1994; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 76; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Blackside, Inc., May 19, 1986, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries; Murphree, *The Selling of Civil Rights*, 62.

<sup>76</sup> Local papers claimed death by carbon monoxide although two had gunshot wounds and the third a broken neck.

<sup>77</sup> Julian Bond, interview by author, Washington DC, October 27, 2008; Dittmer, *Local People*, 215-217; KKK leaflet in Bob Moses and Aaron Henry to Dr. A.B. Britton, Chairman, Advisory Committee to the Commission on Civil Rights, letter, March 5, 1964, William Heath Papers; King, *Freedom Song*, 243; Moses in *The New Yorker*, William Heath Papers, but similar quotes also found in *The Student Voice* of March 3, 1964, of August 1963, of December 1963, of March 3, 1964, and of April 28, 1964 (see Carson, ed., *The Student Voice*, 72, 87, 89, 129, 132, 139); Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 298-299; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 76.

arrests of several SNCC-workers. He protested this “reign of lawlessness” to Robert Kennedy and asked the NAACP’s Jack Greenberg to defend three Greenwood blacks falsely arrested for robbery. “Negroes with decent jobs are being terrorized,” Moses told *The Student Voice*, but “[t]he civil rights bill doesn’t begin to touch the problem of organized racist terror.” On March 5 he again demanded that the U.S. Committee on Civil Rights hold hearings on Mississippi. “The present situation parallels that which existed during the 1880’s,” he wrote, “It was the failure of the federal government to interfere with the Klan then that resulted in the failure of reconstruction...Will the United States once again stand aside while the Klan creates its own law?” Similar crimes could only be prevented, he concluded grimly, if “the people involved are exposed and the situation brought to the nation’s attention.”<sup>78</sup>

When Moses attended resumed meetings about the Summer Project upon his return from McComb, he used the mounting white terrorism as an overriding argument for its acceptance. He recalled in 1983 that he was unsure in “what direction the discussion was heading,” but it was clear that without the Project the new Civil Rights Act would leave “Mississippi just isolated [while the] rest of the country will be moving into a new phase with race relations [so my] gut feeling at the time was that you have to bring Mississippi in with this move.” As of then, he said, “I began to argue strongly” for the Project, which “tipped the decision within the staff.” Some, like Willie Peacock and Hollis Watkins, still opposed, denying that “white participation [was] essential to the survival of the Mississippi movement.” But Moses contested this: “In my mind, the need for a major gesture outweighed legitimate worries of how the influx of white students would affect Black leadership.” It offset concerns over staff manipulation too. He admitted he “threw all my weight behind it” because “I knew [it] would...tip the scales.” If he did not, COFO would simply continue “this deadlock...from one meeting to another.”<sup>79</sup>

COFO-workers eventually accepted the project because of its almost unanimous support from older locals and the sanity of Moses’ arguments. Even Charlie Cobb acknowledged that “you had to do something about this violence [but COFO] didn’t have the capacity.” In 1994 Moses, however, denied that anyone could have determined the debate through argument alone: “It’s not a debate that gets settled because of some rational argument...the issues really lie so much deeper in the emotional dimension of people...There was just deciding whether or not we were going to move.” Emotions went so deep, he stated in a February 1964 interview, that in one meeting someone released a fifteen-minute “series of really racial statements of hatred. And we sort of all just sat there.” Furthermore, as Eric Burner observed, if Moses had stayed silent he would have contradicted his own beliefs: “If speaking is an act of the free mind and conscience, then he had some obligation to speak, if only because his speaking would affirm the right of everyone else to do so.” As Staughton Lynd summarized in a 1964 essay: “The intellectual has a responsibility to take his place in the ring but also, as Professor Woodward said, to ‘shape’ and ‘try to make sense’ of the movement in which he participates...If the scholar-in-action repudiates the role of participant observer, he should at least be an observant participant.”<sup>80</sup>

<sup>78</sup> Bob Moses and Aaron Henry to Dr. A.B. Britton, Chairman, Advisory Committee to the Commission on Civil Rights, letter, March 5, 1964, William Heath Papers; Dittmer, *Local People*, 216; “Klan Beats Miss. Negro,” in *The Student Voice* 5, no. 6 (February 18, 1964): 1, 2, and “Mayhem in Miss.,” *The Student Voice* 5, No. 8 (March 3, 1964): 1, 4, in *The Student Voice*, ed. Carson, 121-122, 129, 132; Burke Marshall to John Lewis and Bob Moses, letter, February 28, 1964, File #0525, Reel 1, Series I, Chairman Files John Lewis, and Bob Moses to Jack Greenberg, letter, March 4, 1964, Files #0007-0008, Reel 7, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers.

<sup>79</sup> Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 355; Moses interview Dittmer, 1983; Moses interview Biewen, American Radio Works, 1994; Dittmer, *Local People*, 219; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 76; Moses interview Carson, 1982.

<sup>80</sup> Charlie Cobb, interview by John Rachal, October 21, 1996, transcript, Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi Collection, University of Southern Mississippi; Moses interview Biewen, American Radio Works, 1994; Robert Penn Warren, “Two for SNCC,” *Commentary*, April 1965; Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 223-224; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 55; Staughton Lynd, “SNCC: The Beginning of Ideology,” August 1964, Box 1, Folder 3, Mary King Papers.

Moses was thus learning that group-centered leadership was more difficult in practice than in theory: its justifications could simultaneously be used to speak up or to stay silent and the choice between was continuously influenced by one's (informal) position in the group based on class, education, personality, and pragmatics. Having continuously fought the tension between the necessity of providing leadership and his unwillingness to impose his views, Moses eventually solved his moral dilemma by subjugating organizers' concerns to the wishes of locals like Allen who cared little for academic banter and just wanted help. Yet this subjugation had far reaching consequences for SNCC and COFO; striking what Marion Barry called "a balance between efficiency and democracy" remained an ongoing challenge—and the Summer Project exacerbated it to the point of their destruction.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> "Minutes of the Meeting of the SNCC Executive Committee," December 27-31, 1963, Files #0313-0328, Reel 3, Series 2, Executive and Central Committees, Executive Committee, SNCC Papers.



## 8. Showdown

### 8.1. Setting the Stage

Assessments of SNCC's 1964 Summer Project—known as 'Freedom Summer'—have been as divergent as its initiators' opinions. Literature on it, historian Charles Payne observed, far exceeds that "on the three years of organizing that preceded it," partly because it "involved large numbers of white people." But also because its story, as Moses stated in 1991, is "about the coming together of a number [of] historical forces" in which "no-one comes out undamaged," including SNCC, COFO, the Democratic Party, and Moses himself. Yet "somehow [in] this process state-sponsored racism gets rooted out."<sup>1</sup>

Judging the Project as a failure or success therefore depends on whether its national, internal, or local impacts are investigated. Historiography treats it similarly to the movement in general. In the 1960-1970s its national effect was emphasized as the volunteers' stories found a widespread market. In 1983 historian Clayborne Carson chronicled its impact on the movement's shift to Black Power and SNCC's decline. Studies by John Dittmer (1994) and Charles Payne (1995) stressed the Project's positive influence on black Mississippians. Participants generally share this view. If measured in "numbers of people touched by the civil rights movement in Mississippi," Julian Bond affirmed, "it can't be anything but a success."<sup>2</sup>

Yet no consensus has emerged. Historian David Garrow rules the Project a "strategic blunder," while sociologist Doug McAdam maintains that it represented a "highwater mark for the New Left as a whole." It can also be argued that its effect upon SNCC, and even its consequences in Mississippi, were less significant than how the Project changed America. Freedom Summer made the introduction of voting legislation all but inevitable, and black enfranchisement changed the face of American politics. The Project deeply influenced the future generation of American leadership, many of whom participated as volunteers, among them Mario Savio, Harold Ickes, and Joe Lieberman. The volunteers' experiences aided the emergence of new social movements, like the Berkeley Free Speech and the anti-war and women's movements. Historian and Freedom Summer participant Staughton Lynd called the Summer "a tragedy in the classical Greek sense, wherein the tragic flaw in a good thing produces a bad thing." Moses likewise saw it "as something good" that "[cut] both ways all the time."<sup>3</sup>

Like other great turning-points in the civil rights movement—the Freedom Rides, McComb, Birmingham—Freedom Summer has been mythologized. It came to symbolize the essence of the Southern-based civil rights movement. This perpetuated its image of an interracial movement rooted in coalition-building and local empowerment that refused to be stopped despite violence. Because it was predominantly his brainchild, the Project and Moses have become synonymous. "However participatory... SNCC was," one worker noted in 2009, "he was nevertheless the real leader of Freedom Summer." Aaron Henry agreed: "Moses was the real architect of the program. We all contributed ideas, but whenever he felt strongly about a particular suggestion, we would heed his advice, and usually it proved to be solid." The Project represented the most challenging, and final, test of his organizational leadership approach. For the summer's duration he succeeded in uniting national and local black leadership, and northern white

<sup>1</sup> Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 301; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, 15 February 1991, Box 108, Folder 3, Taylor Branch Papers.

<sup>2</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 264; Julian Bond, interview by John Britton, January 22, 1968, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University.

<sup>3</sup> David Garrow, lecture, (Leiden University, Leiden, the Netherlands, May 1, 2007); Doug McAdam, "Let It Shine, Let It Shine, Let It Shine," and Staughton Lynd, "Freedom Summer: A Tragedy, Not a Melodrama," in *Freedom Is A Constant Struggle*, ed. Erenrich, 484-491; Bell Gale Chevigny, "The Fruits of Freedom Summer," *The Nation*, August 8-15, 1994; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Joe Sinsheimer, December 5, 1984, Taylor Branch Papers.

liberals, around the goal of prioritizing ending racial violence and democratizing the South. Ultimately, however, this broad-based coalition split apart at the Democratic National Convention in August.<sup>4</sup>

Freedom Summer represented a shift in SNCC's modus operandi: although it worked towards local development it now simultaneously sought national attention 'SCLC-style.' As Moses put it, the volunteers "brought the rest of the country down with them for a look and we knew Mississippi couldn't stand a hard look." That summer, *The Student Voice* noted, SNCC had more staff in Mississippi "than other rights groups have throughout the South." Only SNCC, it can be argued, was capable of such an effort: its past slow organizing made its ambitious 1964 activities possible. "This is what social change is about," Howard Zinn explained in 1965, "You move on to a new level and the minute you appear, the forces that defend the old situation...react violently. When you've established yourself there, they adapt to this, there's a period of relative peace and then you move an inch beyond that." With inventive projects like Freedom Schools, Community Centers, and its own political party, spearheaded by hundreds of white volunteers, the SNCC-led project represented, to quote Martin Luther King, "one of the most creative attempts I had seen to radically change the oppressive life of the Negro" in the history of the civil rights movement.<sup>5</sup>

White Mississippians' responses underscored the Project's audacity. According to *Newsweek* they acted "as though Armageddon were just around the corner." During the spring cross burnings, bombings, and beatings reached record numbers. The KKK and new white supremacist organizations, like the Association for the Preservation of the White Race, mushroomed. In February one KKK-division from Natchez, the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of Mississippi, formed a state-wide organization and adopted a four-stage retaliation plan, with the final stage labeled "Extermination." The FBI considered them "the most furtive, vicious, and close-mouthed of the Klans." Its Imperial Wizard, Samuel Bowers, urged its members—estimated at 6,000 by summer—to form "swift and extremely violent" covert groups which could instantly "destroy and disrupt [our enemy's] leadership."<sup>6</sup>

Local authorities, many of whom had close ties to the White Citizens Councils, the KKK, and the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission,<sup>7</sup> prepared for the "expected invasion" by reaching for the tools of repression. Jackson Mayor Allen Thompson even bought a twelve-man tank "with shotguns, tear-gas guns, and a sub-machine gun." The State Legislature allowed other cities to use 'Allen's Army.' It also gave the highway patrol "full power in civil disorders," and permitted the Governor to deploy it as he saw fit, with or without local authorities' requests. Even the conservative *Delta-Democrat Times* questioned whether a "private army...used at the governor's own discretion" was "a healthy kind of temptation."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Paul Lauter, email interview by author, April 13, 2009; Henry and Curry, *Aaron Henry*, 164.

<sup>5</sup> "Progress Report I: Summer Project," in *The Student Voice* 5, no. 16 (July 15, 1964): 3-4, in *The Student Voice*, ed. Carson, 169-170; O'Reilly, "Racial Matters," 158; Carson, ed., *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 249; Howard Zinn, interview, November 11, 1965, transcript, Box 3, Folder 10, Howard Zinn Papers.

<sup>6</sup> Harold H. Martin and Kenneth Fairly, "We Got Nothing to Hide," *Saturday Evening Post*, January 30, 1965, 27-33, Box 4, Catherine Clarke Civil Rights Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York; Marsh, *God's Long Summer*, 64-66; Dittmer, *Local People*, 215-217.

<sup>7</sup> One SNCC document that researched the connections of the state legislature with the WCC and MSSC found that at least 10 of the 53 members of the Senate were WCC-members and in the House at least 19 out of 122. WCC- and MSSC-members also chaired several state commissions, including the Rules Committee, the Oil and Gas Committees of the Senate, the Fees and Salaries, Finance, Forestry, and Corporations Commissions, and the Labor, County Affairs, Federal Relations, Public Utilities, Education, and Insurance Committees of the House. The President of the Senate and the Speaker of the House automatically belonged to the MSSC too. (Untitled SNCC-report, Spring 1964, Box 2, Folder 6, Howard Zinn Papers)

<sup>8</sup> "Mississippi: Allen's Army," *Newsweek*, February 24, 1964, see File #0031, Reel 10, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers; O'Reilly, "Racial Matters," 161-163; "Mississippi Prepares for Summer Project," *The Student Voice* 5, no. 14 (June 9, 1964): 1-2, in *The Student Voice*, ed. Carson, 159-160; COFO, "Report on new Mississippi laws," June 2, 1964, James Forman Papers, Library of Congress; "1964 new Mississippi laws," report, no date, File #0788, Reel 4, Burke Marshall Records.

National reactions to the Project were generally negative. Opinion polls showed that 65% of Americans “opposed the trek of Northern students to Mississippi.” The White House was appalled. It considered the COFO-workers a “nuisance,” because it well understood that their escalation plans meant a possible reversal of its carefully staked-out position of neutrality. As a “worried Washington official” complained to *The Louisville Times*, COFO-workers “would like to be killed. They want the Federal Government to occupy the state.” Moreover, with the imminent passage of the new Civil Rights Act, Mississippi was already explosive. “[T]here’s going to be the damnedest shootings,” President Lyndon Johnson privately grumbled, because “[COFO’s] sending them in by buses in the hundreds.” He nonetheless refused to talk with Mississippi Governor Paul Johnson for fear of “talk about my trading out.”<sup>9</sup>

Despite his grumbles, President Johnson knew that the federal government was facing a very serious situation. After Burke Marshall reported on the increased activity of the KKK following an early June trip to the state, Robert F. Kennedy warned him repeatedly that “the situation in Mississippi [is] very dangerous.” FBI liaison officer to the CIA Cartha DeLoach documented that Johnson “was particularly concerned over reports that law enforcement officials have either participated in or tolerated acts of terrorism.” At the Justice Department’s request, the President urged the FBI to increase its investigations of “fundamentally lawless activities” in Mississippi; Kennedy even asked the FBI to utilize its techniques for “infiltration of Communist groups” in order to prevent bloodshed.<sup>10</sup>

The FBI complied, but mainly to investigate the COFO-workers instead. Its reasons were twofold. First, the FBI was deeply concerned with its image. When CBS News for instance aired a clip of Stokely Carmichael criticizing the FBI, its agents instantly investigated him with the aim of discrediting him. Likewise, when Moses noted in a July press conference that the KKK possessed automatic firearms and hand-grenades, it spent considerable time uncovering the source of his information and appeared less interested in verifying the truth of his claims. J. Edgar Hoover even accused Burke Marshall and the Commission on Civil Rights (CCR) Staff Director Howard Rogerson of distributing FBI “information to unauthorized persons.” Marshall denied it, although he privately admitted that “the Department had received information indicating that COFO...had undoubtedly been furnished information.” This again suggests that the relationship between federal officials and COFO was closer than hitherto acknowledged.<sup>11</sup>

Second, the FBI targeted COFO because of its alleged communist associations. It concluded in June that it had found “no indication...that COFO is operating as a communist front organization,” and that of the 2,000 (potential) volunteers only a handful “had some association with subversive movements or their parents have.” It nonetheless continued to investigate individuals “in policy-making and leadership capacities,” as well as scrutinize “any publications...prepared by COFO.”<sup>12</sup>

Many white Southerners were convinced that Communists were guiding COFO. Indeed, according to historian Jeff Woods, “[d]uring the summer of 1964, the southern red scare reached its most frantic and

<sup>9</sup> Rothchild, *Northern Volunteers and the Southern ‘Freedom Summers,’* 35; “Rights Fight Heading for a Bitter Summer,” *Louisville Times*, April 29, 1964; O’Reilly, “*Racial Matters,*” 159; Dittmer, *Local People*, 238-239; Beschloss, ed. *Taking Charge*, 312-313, 420-421.

<sup>10</sup> Robert F. Kennedy to Lyndon B. Johnson, memorandum, June 5, 1964, and Lee C. White to Lyndon B. Johnson, memorandum, April 8, 1964, Files #00085-00087 and #00082-00083, Reel 7, Part I, White House Central Files, Papers Lyndon Johnson; Cartha DeLoach to J. Edgar Hoover, letter, June 8, 1964, Box 101, David Garrow Freedom of Information Act Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York; O’Reilly, “*Racial Matters,*” 161-163.

<sup>11</sup> O’Reilly, “*Racial Matters,*” 178-179; Report SAC Albany, July 8 1964, and M.A. Jones to C. DeLoach, memorandum, July 8, 1964, and SAC New Orleans to J. Edgar Hoover, memorandum, July 31, 1964, and Hoover to Burke Marshall and Howard Rogerson, memoranda July 2 and 13, 1964, and A. Rosen to Mr. Belmont, memoranda, July 8 and 10, 1964, and Hoover to W.C. Sullivan and to SAC Jackson, memoranda, November 24 and 25, 1964, and SAC Jackson to Hoover, memorandum, October 28, 1964, Box 101, Folder 62-109384, David Garrow Freedom of Information Act Collection.

<sup>12</sup> SAC New Orleans, memorandum, June 23, 1964, and Hoover to SAC New Orleans, memorandum, November 25, 1964, and W.C. Sullivan, memorandum, November 24, 1964, Box 101, Folder 62-10938, David Garrow Freedom of Information Act Collection.

reckless point.” On July 22 Senator James Eastland even tried to convince the US Senate of “communist infiltration into the so-called civil rights movement” by citing countless examples of ‘suspect’ Freedom Summer participants. The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, which privately characterized SNCC as a “nappy crew of un-Americans,” gave him the list after Governor Paul Johnson had authorized it to bug Freedom Houses. Although SNCC-workers found such accusations “faintly amusing,” Hollis Watkins said that they recognized that many local blacks “didn’t have no understanding of what communism was,” and that the allegations accordingly could “frighten black people away.”<sup>13</sup>

As much as he had pushed hard for its acceptance, Moses faced the Project with some foreboding. He was convinced that its achievements could only be limited. “We may not break Mississippi,” he told *The Detroit Free Press*, “But we will dent it.” In private he sounded less confident. During a speech in April he candidly admitted his concerns: “[N]obody really knows what might happen...we’re back in that same kind of dilemma [of] victims and executioners [but] when you come to deal with it personally, it still rests very heavy.” By June he was so tense that several workers recorded how little he smiled. Due to his role in the Project’s acceptance, he felt personally responsible for its outcome. Moreover, Freedom Summer brought the added weight of being, in effect, a national movement leader.<sup>14</sup>

The Project changed the pattern of Moses’ daily activities from February through the Project’s inception in June<sup>15</sup>. He spent more time on bureaucratic dealings, like networking and making arrangements with outside groups. Above all, he sought ways to reduce the Summer Project’s dangers. With lawyers from Detroit he “formulate[d] a plan to end the blockade imposed against out-of-state lawyers practicing” in Mississippi. He met representatives of lawyers’ associations in Washington in order to ensure that the Project would have access to sufficient legal representation, the few cooperating local attorneys already being overwhelmed. A SNCC-report highlighted the problem: “[O]ur entire legal aid picture is one of confusion. Trial dates go by unremembered, cases are argued with little or no preparation, and grossly unconstitutional situations are allowed to continue without challenge.” Several organizations pledged their aid, including the NAACP’s Legal Defense and Education Fund (or “Inc. Fund”), the CORE-affiliated Lawyers’ Constitutional Defense Committee (LCDC), the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), and the left-leaning National Lawyers’ Guild (NLG).<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Woods, *Black Struggle, Red Scare*, 147, 154, 199-200, 207-210; King, *Freedom Song*, 289; Paul B. Johnson, interview, September 18, 1970, Files #00432-00446, Reel 2, Part 3, Oral Histories, Papers Lyndon Johnson; James Eastland, “Communist Infiltration in the So-Called Civil Rights Movement,” July 22, 1964, transcript in *The Congressional Record* and in Rubin, ed., *Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary*, 94-97; Hollis Watkins, interviews by John Rachal, October 23, 29, 30, 1996, transcript, Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi Collection, University of Southern Mississippi; Tom Scarborough, “Lafayette County” and “Lafayette—Marshall Counties,” investigative reports, May 5 and 19, 1964, Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission Online, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, MS, [http://mdah.state.ms.us/arrec/digital\\_archives/sovcom/](http://mdah.state.ms.us/arrec/digital_archives/sovcom/) (accessed November 22, 2007).

<sup>14</sup> *The Detroit Free Press*, June 22, 1964; Bob Moses, “Speech,” (West Coast Civil Rights Conference, April 23, 1964), transcript, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, University of Southern Mississippi, Jackson, MS.; Paul Lauter, email interview by author, April 19, 2009; Sally Belfrage, *Freedom Summer* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1990), 24; Bruce Watson, *Freedom Summer: The Savage Season That Made Mississippi Burn and Made America a Democracy* (New York: Viking Press, 2010) 29.

<sup>15</sup> During the spring months Moses worked on non-Project-related activities, such as co-coordinating SNCC’s Selma Literacy Project and renewed commodities-drives in Greenwood, Ruleville, and Cleveland, as well.

<sup>16</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 229-230; Casey Hayden to Jon L. Regier of the NCC, letter, February 14, 1964, File #0020, Reel 6, and Mary Varela to James Forman, letters, September 24, 1963, February 3, 1964, and no date, Files #0858-0859, #0869, and #0872, Reel 10, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers; Hunter R. Morey, “The Problem of Legal Aid in Mississippi,” Box 3, Folder 1, and Jack Greenberg to Bob Moses, letter, April 6, 1964, and John Kiefer (of Hand, Kiefer, Allen & Ryan Attorneys and Counselors in Detroit) to Bob Moses, letter, March 18, 1964, Box 3, Folder 4, Hunter R. Morey Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society.

Moses reached out to more Northerners with resources. He contacted the faculties of universities and colleges and asked them to serve as observers, researchers, teachers, and political advisers. He documented that he and Bob Spike of the National Council of Churches tried to “involve the labor movement in [Mississippi] in the same way the church has been.” He wrote to union leaders, including George Meaney (AFL-CIO), James Carey (Industrial Union of Electrical, Radio, and Machine Operators), Walter Reuther (United Automobile Workers), and A. Philip Randolph (Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters). Stressing that labor had a stake in the success of the civil rights movement, he pointed out that “the struggle for the right to vote in Mississippi has largely been a struggle for the right to organize [and] to picket.” Labor could help the Project by sending observers to the June primaries<sup>17</sup>, walking picket lines with locals, and sending speakers to COFO-meetings. The presence of national labor officials, he added, would “be a good experience for local labor leaders and for workers.” In May he went to Detroit and Washington to discuss the Project with Reuther and other union representatives.<sup>18</sup>

Moses tried to influence President Johnson. Howard Zinn had written him that federal protection might be secured if a group of “national prominent figures” met with the President. Zinn’s proposal underscores the significance of activists with broader strategic visions in the movement: as Moses acknowledged in 1991, such a meeting was “not something [the field staff] would be concerned with...That was a thousand miles away from anything that was on our minds.” In April Moses proposed the idea to twenty people, including the heads of the national civil rights organizations, singer Harry Belafonte, actor Marlon Brando, and Harlem rent-strike leader Jesse Gray. “The President must be made to understand that this responsibility rests with him, and him alone,” Moses emphasized, “and that neither he nor the American people can afford to jeopardize the lives of the [summer workers] by failing to take the necessary precautions.” On Ella Baker’s advice, Moses decided that any delegation seeing the President should consist mainly of Mississippians “who can speak from personal involvement.” The letter that went to the President on May 25 did not state any concrete demands. It merely asked “to meet with you to discuss preparations for the summer.” Howard Zinn had recommended demonstrations in Washington if the President refused a meeting. Although Moses liked the idea as long as the demonstrations’ “impetus” came from the South, nothing came of it. Roy Wilkins and Martin Luther King opposed demonstrations on the grounds that they would put “too much pressure on the President all at once.”<sup>19</sup>

The White House refused a meeting regardless. It informed Aaron Henry that the President’s schedule was too “heavy,” although the real reasons were entirely political. Presidential Assistant Lee

<sup>17</sup> See Chapter 9.

<sup>18</sup> Bob Moses, Aaron Henry, and Dave Dennis to “Dear Faculty Member,” letter, April 8, 1964, File #0021-0022, Reel 6, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, and Bob Moses to Robert Spike, letter, May 1, 1964, File #0800, and Bob Moses to George Meaney, A. Philip Randolph, James Carey, Walter Reuther, letters, no date, Files #0800-0806, Reel 70, Appendix A: MFDP Papers, and Minutes SNCC Executive Committee Meeting, May 10, 1964, Files #0993-0997, Reel 3, Series III, Staff Meetings, SNCC Papers.

<sup>19</sup> “To Prevent or Minimize Violence and to Maintain Constitutional Rights in Miss in the Summer of 1964,” memorandum Zinn to Moses, no date (likely March or early April 1964), Box 2, Folder 6, Howard Zinn Papers; Moses to Julian Bond, letter, no date, File #0029, Reel 6, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, Moses to “Friends of Freedom in Mississippi,” memorandum, April 6, 1964, Files #1225-1226, Reel 38, Series XV, State Project Files, and Minutes SNCC Executive Committee Meeting, May 10, 1964, Files #0993-0997, Reel 3, Series III, Staff Meetings, and Aaron Henry, Robert Moses, and David Dennis to Lyndon B. Johnson, letter, May 25, 1964, File #0142, Reel 14, Series VII, Communications Department, Public Relations, SNCC Papers; Dittmer, *Local People*, 239; Minutes SNCC Executive Committee Meeting, April 18-19, 1964, Box 6, Folder 2, Ella Baker Papers; Bob Moses to Martin Luther King et al, letter, May 17, 1964, James Forman Papers, Library of Congress. The others Moses directed the letter to were: Martin Luther King, James Farmer, Roy Wilkins, A. Philip Randolph, Bayard Rustin, John Lewis, James Baldwin, Dick Gregory, Ossie Davis, Aaron Henry, Ed King, Robert Spike, Larry Landry, Clyde Ferguson, Noel Day, and Ella Baker. CORE-lawyer Carl Rachlin, however, considered a pre-summer meeting “tactically unwise” as the President might extract “a counter-promise.” (Carl Rachlin to Marvin Rich, Norman Hill, Gordon Cary, Jim McCain, Val Coleman, Bob Gore, memorandum, April 13, 1964, Box 22, CORE Records)

White wrote President Johnson that he believed it was “nearly incredible that those people who are voluntarily sticking their head into the lion’s mouth would ask for somebody to come down and shoot the lion.” Moses refused to take no for an answer, and on June 14 he wrote the President again. “[S]urely the number of persons who would sit down, plan, and execute” terrorist acts, he wrote coolly, “are relatively few [and] can be singled out.” He bluntly demanded the presence of the Justice Department, “special teams of FBI,” Federal Marshalls, and troops. “We are asking that the Federal Government move before the fact,” he concluded, “I hope this is not asking too much of our country.” Although he never got a reply, behind the scenes the federal government was acting. By late June the Justice Department had established files on the KKK and other extremists, catalogued counties with frequent interference of civil rights, and had sent four “of its most experienced Mississippi lawyers” to travel the state.<sup>20</sup>

Moses instituted another tactic to force federal protection. Because his requests to the Commission on Civil Rights for hearings on Mississippi went unheeded, he helped to organize unofficial, ‘parallel’ ones at the National Theater in Washington. On June 8 twenty-five Mississippi blacks, including Elizabeth Allen, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Jimmy Travis, testified about civil rights violations before a panel of “nationally prominent and respected persons.” The panel included novelist Joseph Heller, then at the height of his fame; writer Michael Harrington, author of *The Other America*, an influential study of poverty; and C. Van Woodward, a southern-born historian best known for his powerful indictment of racial segregation, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*. Howard Zinn had composed the panel and Moses had arranged with Aaron Henry and Wiley Branton that COFO became its official sponsor. He had gained endorsements from the national civil rights organizations and, after meeting Bob Spike in Washington, the National Council of Churches. SNCC invited Congressmen and transcribed the testimonies for publication. “The purpose of this meeting,” Moses stated in opening the hearings, “is to try to open to the country and the world some of the facts which we who work in Mississippi only know too well,” facts that “have not been publicly aired and [are] very difficult to get across to the country.” The panel then added its voice to SNCC’s call for federal protection and for official hearings in Mississippi by the Civil Rights Commission. Two days later the CCR indeed informed Moses that it wanted to meet in Jackson to hear from COFO representatives. It asked SNCC to keep the meeting confidential, and emphasized that “this is not a Commission hearing, but a staff meeting for the purpose of assembling information and appraising witnesses.” Still, COFO regarded it as a victory.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 239; Lee C. White to Lyndon Johnson, memorandum, June 17, 1964, Reel 7, Part 1, White House Central Files, Papers Lyndon Johnson; Robert Moses to Lyndon Johnson, letter, June 14, 1964, Files #0160-0161, Reel 14, Series VII, Communications Department, Public Relations, SNCC Papers; Doar and Landsberg, “The Performance of the FBI in Investigating Violations of Federal Laws Protecting the Right to Vote – 1960-1967,” 43.

<sup>21</sup> Minutes SNCC Executive Committee Meeting, April 18-19, 1964, Box 6, Folder 2, and “Washington Hearings on Mississippi,” memorandum, no date, and Memo to Members United States Congress, June 3, 1964, Box 6, Folder 8, Ella Baker Papers; Bob Moses to Martin Luther King et al, letter, May 17, 1964, James Forman Papers; Julian Bond to John M. Pratt (NCC), letter, June 2, 1964, File #0190, Reel 8, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, and “June 9 hearing and June 10 meeting with President Johnson” memorandum to “Friends of Freedom in Mississippi, Freedom Centers, and Others,” no date, File #1095, Reel 38, Series XV, State Project Files, and Washington hearings, transcripts, in *Congressional Record* of June 16, 1964, see Files #0641-0644, Reel 42, Series XVII, Other Organizations, and Judge Justine Polier, “Summary of Major Points in Testimony by Citizens of Mississippi,” no date, Files #0111-0113, Reel 58, Series II, Subject Files, Washington Office, SNCC Papers; Mike Thelwell to Howard Zinn, letter, May 19, 1964, and “Mississippi Hearings—Procedural Outline—SNCC Washington Office,” memorandum, no date, and “Lyndon Johnson and the Mississippi Summer,” report, 1964, Box 2, Folder 5, Howard Zinn Papers; “Brutality Hearing Held in Capital,” *The Student Voice* 5, no. 14 (June 9, 1964): 1, in *The Student Voice*, ed. Carson, 159; Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 329; Lee, *For Freedom’s Sake*, 78-79, 81-82; Michael O. Finkelstein (CCR) to Bob Moses and Bob Weil, letter, June 10, 1964, Box 3, Folder 4, Hunter R. Morey Papers; COFO Legal Coordinator to “All Project Directors and Law Students,” memorandum, July 28, 1964, Box 1, Folder 12, Council of Federated Organizations Panola County Office Records (hereafter cited as COFO Panola County Office Records), Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.



Moses tried to diminish the dangers further by creating a tight organization in Mississippi itself. There would be forty-four individual projects statewide. Each project had an administrative council consisting of the Freedom School, Community Center, and Voter Registration directors, a lawyer, and a local minister. This was the area's "basic decision making group," but the Jackson office had "the final review." Moses and CORE's Dave Dennis were key members in an "appeal board for decisions."<sup>22</sup>

Moses and Dennis were closely involved in the selection of summer volunteers. The latter were interviewed at FOS-offices ("Freedom Centers") at individual colleges, with a final review of the applicants in Jackson. The Jackson screening committee included Mendy Samstein, Ivanhoe Donaldson, and Dona Richards, with Moses acting as a consultant. As Director, he reserved "the right to make final decisions," allowing him to safeguard his concerns for safety and local empowerment. "There will be danger," he explained to *The Reporter*, "in accepting anyone who greatly misunderstands himself, the movement, or Mississippi." He advised recruitment centers to reject people who were arrogant or trying to be heroes, and instead to identify "the willing ones (i.e., willing to do anything) and the *non-rugged individualists*" who would adhere to "strict discipline." He informed volunteers of Project specifics (like assignments and costs) and suggested ways how they could raise funds. But "in the final analysis," he concluded characteristically, "you would be the best judge of what [fundraising] approach would produce the best results." He also wrote rejection letters. While they were standardized letters, they featured Moses' distinctive emphasis on personal worth. Everyone had something worthwhile to contribute, he replied, even if only through contributions or pressuring politicians: "[Y]our role...will still be of critical nature...[N]o revolution can continue without its supply base or support troops."<sup>23</sup>

Moses influenced recruitment most directly through his tours of Northern colleges. As a graduate of elite white universities, he easily connected with these students. At Stanford University, for instance, he summarized the lessons he learned from Mississippi's sharecroppers in the style of philosophy classes familiar to them: "The questions that we think face the country...go very much to the bottom of mankind and people. They're questions which have repercussions in...international affairs and relations. They're questions which go to the very root of our society. What kind of society will we be?" At others he simply held question-and-answer sessions. Louis Lomax' coverage of one such session at Queens College in New York City for *Ramparts* noted how Moses constantly tried to ensure that those who were accepted understood the consequences. When the students laughed at James Forman's description of preparing for unsavory conditions like doing "your business in outhouses," Lomax stated Moses lost his cool: "'Don't laugh,' Moses screamed. 'This is for real—like for life and death.'" While Julian Bond later wrote *Ramparts* to rectify that "Moses never screams," Lomax' embellishment does indicate a perceived shift of emotion on Moses' part that betrayed his preoccupation with preventing bloodshed. Moses' communication skills helped present Northern reporters to better understand the Project's goals as well. Sympathetic journalists from magazines like *The Saturday Evening Post* and *The Reporter* invariably explained the Project to a national audience through him; some, like the editor of *The World*, sent reprints of their articles to him for distribution, hoping it caused "much good publicity [for] you and your cause."<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> "Mississippi Summer Project," memorandum, no date, Files #0034-0036, Reel 64, Appendix A: MFDP Papers, and Minutes SNCC Executive Committee Meeting, June 9-11, 1964, Files #0975-0992, Reel 3, Series III, Staff Meetings, SNCC Papers; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 149-150.

<sup>23</sup> Richard Woodley, "It Will Be a Hot Summer in Mississippi," *The Reporter* 30, no. 11 (May 21, 1964); Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 154; Moses, "Memo to Freedom Centers," no date (likely April 1964), Mississippi Department of Archives and History, and Moses, Rejection letter, no date, Miller Civil Rights Collection, University of Southern Mississippi.; Minutes SNCC Executive Committee Meeting, April 18-19, 1964, Box 6, Folder 2, Ella Baker Papers; John Maguire to COFO and Moses, letter, May 11, 1964, Files #0849-0850, Reel 69, Appendix A: MFDP Papers, and Moses to accepted volunteers, letters, no date, File #0804, Reel 39, Series XV, State Project Files, SNCC Papers; Moses to accepted applicants, memoranda, no date, William Heath Papers.

<sup>24</sup> Hammerback and Jensen, "Robert Parris Moses," in *African-American Orators*, ed. Leeman, 265; Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 295-296; Henry and Curry, *Aaron Henry*, 164-165; Louis E. Lomax, "The Road to Mississippi," *Ramparts*, Special Edition

Despite Moses' aversion to publicity, SNCC-historian Vanessa Murphree noted that he and other SNCC-leaders "accepted many public relations responsibilities as natural extensions of their positions." Moreover, Moses understood that publicity was essential. In meetings and memoranda he suggested that COFO "get Bayard Rustin...to give the project a national focus." He asked volunteers for pictures of themselves for publicity purposes, and advised recruitment centers to gather the volunteers "from your area...to hold a press conference" at which they should call for federal protection. Yet his prime motivation in doing all this remained empowering locals, not the projection of the volunteers or himself. He still refused to be interviewed for a CBS documentary that included Governor Paul Johnson because, he explained during SNCC's June 9-11 meeting, the "concept of group leadership [is] more important than one man." After all, "I didn't want myself projected as [a] leader as [I] would be if [I sat] next to Johnson." Furthermore, he added, if reporters came by "following the Northern kids," COFO could *then* "project local people." His insistence on temporarily moving headquarters from Atlanta to Greenwood, which SNCC finally agreed to, likewise reflected his concern for protection of locals and staff members. "The move," he asserted in April, "will create greater publicity" because "local newspapers of participating workers would be more responsive to calls actually coming from inside the state."<sup>25</sup>

To recruit volunteers Moses contemplated using Allard Lowenstein again. While his doubts about Lowenstein had remained unaltered, he believed that his involvement was critical. He invited him to COFO-meetings, including its State Convention on February 9 when locals voted to endorse the Project. But Lowenstein again tried to assume control, including setting up a recruiting office in Boston without contacting its FOS-group. "Al wanted," Julian Bond still grumbled in 2008, "to run the Summer Project—from New York." Moreover, from as early as January he questioned SNCC's overrepresentation in COFO and in the Summer Project. According to Ed King, Lowenstein even pondered "creating a new leadership structure for the Mississippi movement" that was more closely aligned to his moderate allies in the NAACP. Several annoyed SNCC-workers believed that he recruited volunteers independently in order to "keep volunteers with radical views out." Moses acknowledged this in 1989: Lowenstein "did not trust the COFO-operation to run [the Project and] that really surfaced around the question of who should be allowed to come down." In February Moses nonetheless begged for his support: "If you pull out it won't reduce any tensions absolutely, it will merely be an exchange of one set for another. You know yourself that nothing political and significant can be done without public tension—it stands to reason they won't be done without private ones also. You not only have to stay—you must."<sup>26</sup>

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1964, 8-23, Box 1, Catherine Clarke Civil Rights Collection; Julian Bond to Edward Keating, letter, November 3, 1964, File #0524, and William Greger (editor *The World*) to Bob Moses, letter, March 26, 1964, and Bond to Greger, letter, April 6, 1964, Files #0384 and #0401, Reel 12, Series VII, Communications Department, Public Relations, SNCC Papers; Woodley, "It Will Be a Hot Summer in Mississippi"; James Atwater, "If We Can Crack Mississippi...," *Saturday Evening Post*, July 25-August 1, 1964, 15-19; Joanne Grant, "Freedom Story: Mississippi's Way of Life," *National Guardian*, September 19, 1964.

<sup>25</sup> Murphree, *The Selling of Civil Rights*, 64-65; "Notes on Staff Executive Meeting," January 17, 1964, James Forman Papers, Library of Congress; Moses to accepted volunteers, memorandum, no date, William Heath Papers; Bob Moses, "Memo to Freedom Centers," no date (likely early April 1964), Mississippi Department of Archives and History, University of Southern Mississippi, Jackson, MS; SNCC Executive Committee Meeting, April 18-19, 1964, minutes, Reel 3, Series III, Staff meetings, SNCC Papers; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 370, n37. Moses added at a SNCC meeting in June that moving headquarters to Mississippi represented SNCC's organizational leadership principle at its best: "Decision-making should be geared to programs, not to hierarchy. We need the executive committee for review of decisions and long range planning [but] for the summer we need people who can make key decisions on the spot." (SNCC Executive Committee Meeting, June 9-11, 1964, Handwritten and typed minutes, Files #0887-0909 and #0975-0992, Reel 3, Series III, Staff meetings, SNCC Papers)

<sup>26</sup> "Minutes of the COFO Convention," February 9, 1964, James Forman Papers, Library of Congress; Dittmer, *Local People*, 232-234; Julian Bond, interview by author, Washington DC, October 27, 2008; Chafe, *Never Stop Running*, 189-192, 206; Robert Parris Moses, interview by William Chafe, October 7, 1989, transcript, Allard Lowenstein Papers;

A month later, however, conflicts between SNCC and Lowenstein reached a climax when SNCC accepted the National Lawyers' Guild's (NLG) assistance. The NLG had been targeted for its non-exclusion of Communists since the 1930s, and Lowenstein, as one historian put it, was "as committed to anti-Communism as he was to black civil rights." He convinced Stanford volunteers to invite Moses and demand that he decline the NLG's offer. Other Project-supporters agreed. Jack Greenberg informed Moses that the Inc. Fund, like the LCDC, "will not engage in any joint ventures...with the National Lawyers' Guild, and that we will not agree to any division of jurisdictional lines with them as you suggest. If SNCC or COFO enter into an arrangement with the Guild we will be unable to participate." Bob Spike wrote Moses that the National Council of Churches considered the Guild's involvement "so serious a complication" that it jeopardized "the possibility of extensive legal help this summer." The national civil rights organizations likewise condemned the move. SCLC's Andrew Young asked SNCC to reconsider; the NAACP's Roy Wilkins flatly refused cooperation; and CORE's Carl Rachlin even informed Burke Marshall and the FBI of the NLG's involvement.<sup>27</sup>

This backlash upset Moses. Although the NCC had agreed to pay for the volunteers' training and transportation, he was loath to repudiate the NLG's help. He begged Greenberg and others to see that the Communist-issue "is not our fight. Don't make it our fight." After all, in life-and-death cases, Moses told *The National Guardian*, the Communist-issue was "irrelevant. Some of the best legal service we have received has come from the Guild. We have found the Guild willing to take cases that we could get none of the other lawyers to handle." Moreover, his critics' assumptions were patronizing and hypocritical, he stated in 1989: "[Y]ou're trying to do what you say [Communists] want to do. I mean, you're going to say, 'They're going to come in and tell us who we can associate with'—that's why you don't want them in. [But] you're just doing that right now...[W]e're our own people and are able to figure out who we want to associate with [so] you don't really credit us with being able to do that [as if] we are somehow people that need to be protected and you are the people to protect us."<sup>28</sup>

The issue forced national SNCC to debate its 'open door'-policy again. At a mid-April meeting it agreed that "we could not allow the legal establishment to make policy for us" and confirmed its commitment to free association. As Mississippi Director, Moses faced most of its consequences. When he travelled to Stanford University a week later he staunchly defended COFO's choice not to have "that whole atmosphere of the fifties injected into the movement." Furious, Lowenstein advised the students to withdraw from the Project, alleging that Moses was "run by Peking." While publicly criticizing SNCC, Ed King claimed that Lowenstein privately asked him to have Moses appoint him an important position in the Project in return for not abandoning it. This went against SNCC's modus operandi, and SNCC-workers insisted that he could only stay as "an obscure volunteer in some place." Moses now carefully avoided him. He even had Mendy Samstein "covering for me [so] I didn't have to [deal with him]." According to his biographer, Lowenstein "could not resolve his ambivalence" over the Project and left for Europe in June. He later briefly came to Mississippi and attended the Democratic National Convention. He and Moses saw each other occasionally but never spoke. With Lowenstein's departure SNCC not only lost an important recruiter with valuable political connections, but also a much needed mediator between the different civil rights groups. This is partly why Moses begged Lowenstein to stay in February: "We are just beginning to

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"Black and White Together: The Freedom Summer Experience," report, November 13, 1980, and Bob Moses to Allard Lowenstein, letter, no date (likely February 1964), William Heath Papers.

<sup>27</sup> Woods, *Black Struggle, Red Scare*, 206-207; Dittmer, *Local People*, 230, 233-234; Chafe, *Never Stop Running*, 193; Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 273-274; O'Reilly, "Racial Matters," 181-184; Greenberg and Spike to Moses, letter, April 7 and 27, 1964, Folder 4, Hunter R. Morey Papers; Carl Rachlin to Marvin Rich, Norman Hill, Gordon Cary, Jim McCain, Val Coleman, and Bob Gore, memorandum, April 13, 1964, Box 22, CORE Records; "Meeting Following Atlanta CUCRL Meeting," minutes, May 15, 1964, Files #0998-0999, Reel 3, Series III, Staff Meetings, SNCC Papers.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by William Chafe interview, October 7, 1989, Allard Lowenstein Papers, see also Chafe, *Never Stop Running*, 207; *National Guardian*, June 27, 1964.

open up the Pandora of inter-civil rights organizational territory, you have got to help us iron them out. If we lose dialogue, then we will be lost.”<sup>29</sup>

On the national level the groups aligned in COFO seriously mistrusted each other. Moses acknowledged that “[n]obody is happy with COFO [except] local Mississippi Negro folk.” The Project intensified inter-organizational rivalry. “I see the summer project as sort of a confrontation (SNCC [versus] the others),” reported Charlie Cobb, “As things stand now, COFO is not a reality and the other civil rights groups have made minimal steps to make it a reality.” SNCC especially resented the fact that other organizations used COFO for their own projection, but were unwilling to commit significant amounts of money and manpower. During the 1963 Greenville meeting SNCC had already considered excluding the NAACP if that organization “was not going to lend its full weight behind COFO,” but decided to tolerate it because “the NAACP’s name was of benefit to us.” The NAACP in turn resented its limited role in COFO’s decision-making structure and considered the Project a waste of money. As Roy Wilkins told SNCC: “The NAACP doesn’t put anything into a project where it doesn’t expect to get something out.” In an internal memorandum Gloster Current recognized the “strength in unity,” but criticized “some of the antics of SNCC, which we cannot support.” The upshot was that SNCC faced a huge financial challenge. “CORE plans to put \$1,000 per month into the program,” Moses noted. “SCLC’s investment will come via the citizenship schools; NAACP is not interested...Which leaves the problem of whether SNCC wants to underwrite the balance of \$5,118.92 per month projected costs.”<sup>30</sup>

But national SNCC was not fully supportive of COFO or the Project either. Apart from concerns over bloodshed and grassroots leadership, it worried about SNCC’s place in COFO’s structure. Its goal had always been facilitating local organizations as independent units, but, historian John Dittmer noted, when COFO adopted a constitution and held monthly meetings, some SNCC-workers felt threatened. “[A]cknowledging [COFO’s] independence,” James Forman admitted, “meant submitting to the will of a body which could make decisions in conflict with important principles of ours.” During spring some SNCC-workers even discussed whether “COFO should develop as a membership organization rather than as a federation of local affiliates.” They eventually “voted to favor the latter,” but the discussion in itself indicates that, despite popular memory, not everyone in SNCC believed that non-hierarchical grassroots control was always a self-evident choice for organizing. It further demonstrates that COFO’s development was in a continuous flux—leaving its workers never entirely sure of its purpose—and rather depended on the views of the staff of professional organizations than on that of locals.<sup>31</sup>

SNCC headquarters regarded “the continued existence of COFO as detrimental to SNCC’s growth” in terms of finances and media coverage. In the first quarter of 1964 SNCC staff went unpaid three times because of SNCC’s precarious financial situation. Donors preferred giving money to COFO even though SNCC-workers were doing most of the work. Naturally, Casey Hayden stated in 1986, “national

<sup>29</sup> “Minutes of SNCC’s Executive Committee Meeting,” April 19, 1964, Files #0857–0868, Reel 3, Series 3, Staff Meetings, SNCC Papers; Dittmer, *Local People*, 233–234; Robert Parris Moses, interview by William Chafe, October 7, 1989, and Ed King, interview by William Chafe, March 30, 1988, Allard Lowenstein Papers; Chafe, *Never Stop Running*, 189, 192–194; Moses interview Carson, 1982; Mendy Samstein, “Notes on Mississippi,” report, no date 1963, Folder 1, Mendy Samstein Papers; Moses to Lowenstein, letter, no date (likely February 1964), William Heath Papers.

<sup>30</sup> Charlie Cobb, memorandum, no date, James Forman Papers, Library of Congress; Robert Parris Moses, interview by William Chafe, October 7, 1989, Allard Lowenstein Papers; Ed King, interview by Anne Romaine, September 5, 1966, transcript, Anne Romaine Papers; Current to Henry, letter, March 17, 1964, Reel 10, Group III, Box C-74, Part 27, Records NAACP; “Minutes of the Meeting of the SNCC Executive Committee,” December 27–31, 1963, Files #0313-0328, Reel 3, Series II, Executive and Central Committees, Executive Committee, SNCC Papers.

<sup>31</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 236; SNCC Executive Committee Meeting, June 9–11, 1964, minutes, Files #0975-0992, Reel 3, Series III, Staff Meetings, SNCC Papers; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 377; “Notes of a Discussion of Possible Agenda for COFO meeting [1964],” no date (likely early 1964, after the Freedom Vote but before the final decision on the Summer Project), Folder 1, Mendy Samstein Papers. The SNCC-workers present were J.E. Collier, Mat Suarez, Mike Sayer, MacArthur Cotton, Jesse Harris, Oscar Chase, and Mendy Samstein.

SNCC [felt] threatened by what was going on in Mississippi.” When the media began reporting on the Project, all national organizations, including SNCC, tried to generate publicity for themselves and boost their own fundraising. Aaron Henry calculated in a letter to Gloster Current “what springboard it would be for the NAACP [to pronounce] a contribution on [the Project’s] announcement day.” As a result, Ivanhoe Donaldson complained, COFO threatened to become “a confederation [projecting] the national programs of national organizations” rather than a local initiative with its own programs.<sup>32</sup>

Incidents like James Farmer’s announcement of the Summer Project in *The Washington Post* on February 23—despite COFO’s agreement to announce it at a joint press conference in Jackson on March 15—deepened this concern. “[I]f the national organizations insist on releasing press statements which give the impression that the entire program is their own,” Moses wrote Farmer, “then that will inexorably lead to cynicism and demoralization of the staff which must work very closely together in the field.” Consensus-minded as he was, he assured Farmer that “it is possible to all work together,” and confessed that *Newsweek* had wrongly implied that the Project was SNCC’s. In reprimanding Farmer his main concern was not SNCC’s projection, but, he wrote, the damage for Mississippi blacks “who are in desperate need of a united front to give them psychological courage.” In April he proposed that SNCC should “develop some means of publicizing good points of the various civil rights groups and their programs.”<sup>33</sup>

Despite Moses’ attempts to guard everyone’s interests, the unity between the civil rights groups remained tentative. In May, SNCC Executive Committee members repeatedly called “to project SNCC’s image or else we’ll be continually overridden.” At the June meeting some even questioned Moses’ loyalty to SNCC, because how “could Bob set up a confederation like COFO through which these other groups would...raise funds for their own operations and use the publicity if Bob really cared about SNCC?” Moses characteristically responded with calm pragmatism. “My commitment is basically as a SNCC person,” he vowed, but what mattered was not projection but that “[t]he energy that makes COFO positive comes from SNCC.” Mary King later commented that “the prospect of one thousand white volunteers...was what [really] was bothering people and that was why they had turned on Bob.” But it was not even that, one worker explained at the meeting: “[I]t’s not whites that are feared but *death*.” But there was no way back now. The time for what Moses in December had called the “final showdown” had come.<sup>34</sup>

## 8.2. Are You Kidding?

To minimize dangers, Moses had argued since January that SNCC organize orientation sessions for the volunteers before the Project’s start. Their purpose, he told *The Reporter*, was “recognizing our own attitudes and the attitudes of the people here.” The Project’s “tougher problems,” he explained, were answering such basic questions as: “Is the whole program worthwhile? What are the goals? What is the black-white relationship?” It was essential, he asserted in June, that SNCC should “set a tone at the orientation [so the] volunteers can understand...what they’re getting into.” To finance the sessions he secured \$25,000 from the NCC, and following up a suggestion by Myles Horton, substantial donations from Chicago philanthropist Lucy Montgomery. Western College for Women in Oxford, Ohio, agreed to

<sup>32</sup> McAdam, *Freedom Summer*, 40; Casey Hayden, interview by Blackside, Inc., May 15, 1986, for *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries, St. Louis, Missouri; Aaron Henry to Gloster Current, letter, March 8, 1964, Reel 10, Group III, Box C-74, Part 27 Selected Branch Files, Microfilm, Records NAACP.

<sup>33</sup> Bob Moses to James Farmer, letter, March 2, 1964, File #0582, Reel 42, Series XVII, Other Organizations, SNCC Papers; SNCC Executive Committee Meeting, April 18-19, 1964, minutes, Box 6, Folder 2, Ella Baker Papers.

<sup>34</sup> Meeting SNCC Executive Committee, minutes, May 10, 1964, Files #0093-0097, and SNCC Executive Committee Meeting, June 9-11, 1964, minutes, Files #0975-0992, Reel 3, Series III, Staff Meetings, and “Minutes of the Meeting of the SNCC Executive Committee,” December 27-31, 1963, Files #0313-0328, Reel 3, Series II, Executive and Central Committees, Executive Committee, SNCC Papers; King, *Freedom Song*, 309-310.

host the two, week-long orientation sessions<sup>35</sup>. The first session, for 300 volunteers who would work on voter registration, started on June 14, and the second, for 175 Freedom School teachers, on June 21.<sup>36</sup>

Moses left an indelible stamp on both sessions. He outlined the Project's goals in the keynote address and spoke regularly throughout both weeks. COFO had no money, he told the volunteers, so they should depend on local leadership: "[W]here you have people and programs and the minimum materials, a lot can be done." He emphasized the dangerous realities of their jobs. COFO's lawyers would help them when arrested, he reassured them, but told them not to be distracted by allegations about the National Lawyers Guild. "This kind of thing bogs us down. I don't want to get caught up in a discussion of communism in the movement. It's divisive, and it's not a negotiable issue." He urged the volunteers to avoid arrests if at all possible and to post bail if they were. Female volunteers should wear modest clothing, he advised, and avoid going to bars. "Don't come to Mississippi this summer to save the Mississippi Negro," he told them. "Only come if you understand, really understand, that his freedom and yours are one." The volunteers should be realistic in terms of what they could achieve. "Maybe we're not going to get many people registered [or] into Freedom Schools. Maybe all we're going to do is *live* through this summer. In Mississippi, that will be so much!" One volunteer wrote that Moses considered merely "our spending the summer in Negro homes...a very important victory." When addressing the second group Moses added: "You are not going to Mississippi to try to be heroes...You are heroes enough just going into the state. This is not a Freedom Ride...You have a job to do. If each of you can leave behind you three people who are stronger than before, this will be almost 3000 more people we will have to work with next year."<sup>37</sup>

Moses discouraged direct action, telling the volunteers that they should always identify themselves as "working on voter registration, that you did not come down to organize any sit-ins[,] marches or demonstrations." Integrated restaurants were of no interest to Mississippi's black poor, he explained, and "a sit-in" or "unwise individual action" in northeast Mississippi "might provoke a killing in the southwest." In a memo to the volunteers' parents he underlined the fact that "we are specifically avoiding any demonstrations for integrated facilities, as we do not feel the state is ready to permit such activity at this time." Several COFO-workers disagreed, especially now the new Civil Rights Act, effective on July 2, begged testing. Stokely Carmichael and Bob Zellner grudgingly urged teenagers in Greenwood to follow Moses' directives, but local youth—spearheaded by Laura McGhee's son Silas—moved independently. As Moses predicted, this eventually provoked white mob violence and Silas' near-fatal shooting.<sup>38</sup>

Because most volunteers did not know what to expect, COFO-staff lectured them on Mississippi history and law, aided by role-playing workshops. Drawing a map of Mississippi on the blackboard, Moses explained its different areas in terms of black population strengths, leniency towards civil rights, and the

<sup>35</sup> Originally the orientation was planned at Kentucky's Berea College, but the College withdrew its consent following protests from alumni and trustees.

<sup>36</sup> Woodley, "It Will Be a Hot Summer in Mississippi," *The Reporter* 30, no. 11 (May 21, 1964); SNCC Executive Committee Meeting, June 9-11, 1964, minutes, Files #0975-0992, Reel 3, Series III, Staff Meetings, and Casey Hayden to Jon L. Regier (NCC), letter, February 14, 1964, File #0020, Reel 6, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers; SNCC Executive Committee Meeting, April 18-19, 1964, minutes, Box 6, Folder 2, Ella Baker Papers; COFO Staff Executive Committee Meeting, January 10, 1964, minutes, and Summer Project Committee to COFO Staff Executive Committee, memorandum, January 17, 1964, James Forman Papers, Library of Congress; Myles Horton to Bob Moses, letter, April 17, 1964, Box 21, Highlander Research and Education Center Collection; Greenberg, ed., *A Circle of Trust*, 201.

<sup>37</sup> Summer Project Committee to COFO Staff Executive Committee, memorandum, January 17, 1964, James Forman Papers, Library of Congress; Belfrage, *Freedom Summer*, 9-11; Lise Vogel, "Notes of 1964 Orientation," Lise Vogel Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society; Watson, *Freedom Summer*, 29; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 155-156; Lewis and D'Orso, *Walking with the Wind*, 256-257; Sutherland-Martinez, ed., *Letters from Mississippi*, 13.

<sup>38</sup> "Rights Workers Off for Mississippi to Register Negro Voters," *New York Times*, June 21, 1964; Vogel, "Notes of 1964 Orientation," Lise Vogel Papers; Belfrage, *Freedom Summer*, 9-11, 170-177; Moses to Parents Volunteers, memorandum, no date, William Heath Papers; Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 389-390; Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 395-397; Payne, *I've Got The Light of Freedom*, 210-214.



absence or presence of “anti-Negro organizations.” Volunteers should memorize the Inc. Fund’s “If You Are Arrested in Mississippi”-pamphlet and COFO’s Security Handbook. SNCC staff members read out hate mail they had received. One such letter called the volunteers “morally rotten outcasts” who upon entering Mississippi deserved to “get their just dues as infiltrators of an enemy power.” But not all the volunteers appeared to understand what they were getting into. As Cleveland Sellers pointed out: “Many of them talked about Mississippi as if it were somehow the same romanticized scenes they had read in *Gone with the Wind*.”<sup>39</sup>

Most volunteers were white, came from urban areas in New England or California, and attended elite universities like Harvard and Berkeley. Their median family income was twice the national average. Only 10 percent was black—not a bad showing in view of the fact that blacks accounted for only 2.9 percent of the nation’s college students, and that very few attended the top universities where SNCC recruited. Because the volunteers had to be self-supporting and those under 21 needed parental consent, most were older than the 1960 sit-in students. In early July about 450 volunteers were in Mississippi. They were later supplemented with 400 more, but there were never more than 650 at any one time. Several hundreds of doctors, educators, and clergymen volunteered as well through organizations like the Delta Ministry and the Medical Committee on Human Rights.<sup>40</sup>

Race and class tensions emerged even before the volunteers had set foot in Mississippi. Although some SNCC staff members welcomed the volunteers—“We need you,” Fannie Lou Hamer pleaded, “Help us communicate with white people”—others were openly hostile. They mistrusted the volunteers’ inexperience, fearing that “that idiot in my group [will] get me killed by doing something stupid.” It did not help that reporters swarmed around the volunteers. “*Look*-magazine is searching for the ideal naïve northern middle-class white girl,” one wrote home, “For the national press, that’s the big story.” Naivety and a desire for gratitude in turn blinded many volunteers: “*I want to be your friend, you black idiot*, was the contradiction everywhere.” Tension reached a crisis on June 16 when some volunteers laughed at cartoonish registrar Theron Lynd during a showing of the documentary *Moses* helped to film in 1962. Several COFO-members walked out in a fury. Afterwards volunteers and staff “had the whole thing out” until Jimmy Travis soothed the conflict by promising the volunteers that “SNCC will not let you down” during trouble.<sup>41</sup>

Feeling guilty, Moses resumed his role as mediator. “What happened was quite profound,” he reflected later, because “we were...trying to sharpen the volunteers’ sense of reality.” One volunteer documented that during the clash “Bob and Dona Moses were both in tears.” Staughton Lynd wrote that just four days earlier Moses had stated “that if anyone was to blame for cutting off the discussion of feeling toward whites too soon, it was he.” He had tended “to discourage the kind of soul-sharing Sherrod cultivated in SW Georgia,” and simply put twenty of SNCC’s black NAG-workers in the Delta and made Stokely Carmichael District Director to “eliminate staff misgivings” about whites taking over. But this clearly proved inadequate, so he informed the second volunteer group of COFO’s endless discussions “about race hatred,” of which the first group had known nothing. He used an analogy from Albert Camus’ *The Plague*, in which state authorities refused to recognize the disease at great expense. The same was true for the “plague of prejudice,” he explained. “The country isn’t willing yet to admit it has the plague,

<sup>39</sup> Vogel, “Notes of 1964 Orientation,” Lise Vogel Papers; Belfrage, *Freedom Summer*, 9-11; Sutherland-Martinez, ed., *Letters from Mississippi*, 15; Watson, *Freedom Summer*, 29; Sellers, *The River of No Return*, 82-83; Security Handbook, Files #0694-0695, Reel 39, and James Forman to “Friend,” letter, June 18, 1964, and Charles Benner (National States Rights Party) to John Lewis, letter, June 16, 1964, File #1096, Reel 38, Series XV, State Project Files, SNCC Papers; “If You Are Arrested in Mississippi,” pamphlet, Box 1, Folder 6, COFO Panola County Office Records.

<sup>40</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 244-245; Julian Bond, “1964 Miss Freedom Summer,” in *Freedom Is A Constant Struggle*, ed. Erenrich, 78-84. For more details on the volunteers’ backgrounds, see Doug McAdam’s *Freedom Summer*.

<sup>41</sup> Belfrage, *Freedom Summer*, 7; Dittmer, *Local People*, 242-244; Carson, *In Struggle*, 112-113; Watson, *Freedom Summer*, 30, 33; Sutherland-Martinez, ed., *Letters from Mississippi*, 22; Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 351-352; “Preparing for Mississippi—How to Absorb a Blow,” *The New York Herald Tribune*, June 18, 1964.

but it pervades the whole society. Everyone must come to grips with this, because it affects us all." He made a plea to "discuss it openly and honestly, even with the danger that we get too analytic and tangled up. If we ignore it, it's going to blow up in our faces."<sup>42</sup>

When John Doar addressed the volunteers, Moses again served as a mediator. The volunteers had just written a poignant plea to President Johnson: "[A]s we depart for that troubled state, [we ask] to hear your voice in support of those principles to which Americans have dedicated and sacrificed themselves." But when asked what protection they could expect, Doar bluntly told them: "Nothing. There is no federal police force." Angry, the volunteers started booing until Moses intervened. "We don't do that," he reprimanded, and explained that "Doar was only being honest." He shamed the group by observing that "we are all—the whole nation—deeply involved in the crimes of Mississippi." As an example he used Harvard University, which was the largest stockholder in the holding company for Mississippi Power and Light "on whose board sit several White Citizens Council leaders." He told the second group to "be polite" to Doar: "A year ago this week Medgar Evers was buried. It was a near riot situation, and Doar was sent in to prevent worse. He has helped us." "Because of Moses' admonition," one volunteer recorded, "most of the [volunteers'] muttering remained only that."<sup>43</sup>

Moses was decisive in the debate over nonviolence as well. For him this was not only a practical necessity in order to minimize bloodshed, but also a basic principle. James Lawson and John Lewis are often considered the embodiment of philosophical nonviolence in SNCC, but no-one, historian Timothy Tyson claimed, "more closely identified with [it] than Moses." John Lewis agrees: "Maybe he didn't say he was the most nonviolent person [but] he *lived* nonviolence...his very existence [and] rare demeanor was [all nonviolence]." By 1964, however, Moses' views were shared by a declining minority of SNCC staff members. As Moses acknowledged in February, most were "not sympathetic to the idea that they have to love [those] they are struggling against...there's a constant dialogue at meetings about nonviolence." Due to whites' increased hostility, a lack of training in nonviolence, and federal inertia, workers accepted locals' armed defense of the properties they stayed at. "No-one here has lived the life of Gandhi," Sam Block exclaimed at SNCC's June meeting, "Bob's too valuable to be killed in Mississippi, because there's nothing in Mississippi worth dying for! I'm not going to carry a gun but if someone else is going to protect himself, then let him protect me as well!" Some admitted to having had guns in the Greenwood office "since January."<sup>44</sup>

To create a consensus Moses therefore took a pragmatic approach. While he had argued in April that "if you do nothing to change the violent beliefs of people with whom you work, then you're inconsistent with these [nonviolent] beliefs," he now maintained that "[s]elf-defense is so deeply

<sup>42</sup> *Freedom On My Mind*, directed by Connie Field and Marilyn Mulford, Clarity Educational Productions, 1994; Terri Shaw, "Freedom Summer Recollections," no date, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, University of Southern Mississippi, Jackson, MS; Watson, *Freedom Summer*, 30-31; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 79; Staughton Lynd to Howard Zinn, letter, June 12, 1964, Box 2, Folder 7, Howard Zinn Papers; Carson, *In Struggle*, 114; Belfrage, *Freedom Summer*, 9-11; Sutherland-Martinez, ed., *Letters from Mississippi*, 13.

<sup>43</sup> Volunteers to President Johnson, letter, June 17, 1964, File #0161, Reel 14, Series VII, Communications Department, Public Relations, SNCC Papers; Watson, *Freedom Summer*, 34, 36; Dittmer, *Local People*, 239-240, 245; Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 369-371; Anne Braden, draft article, 1964, Box 56, Folder 1, Carl and Anne Braden Papers; Belfrage, *Freedom Summer*, 22-23; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 157-158; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Joe Sinsheimer, December 5, 1984, transcript, Taylor Branch Papers.

<sup>44</sup> Timothy Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 212; John Lewis, interview by author, Washington DC, November 16, 2009; Hogan, *Many Minds, Many Hearts*, 84-85; Warren, *Who Speaks For the Negro?* 91; SNCC Executive Committee Meeting, June 9-11, 1964, minutes, Files #0975-0992, Reel 3, Series III, Staff Meetings, SNCC Papers; King, *Freedom Song*, 311-313; Crosby, *A Little Taste of Freedom*, 169; Fleming, *Soon We Will Not Cry*, 112-113; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 204-205. SNCC-workers acceptance of self-defense also seemed logical; studies of Southern communities have shown that self-defense was a traditional aspect of blacks' lives. As Joyce Ladner said: "All our parents had guns." For more on southern self-defense tradition see Tyson's *Radio Free Dixie* and Lance Hill's *The Deacons for Defense*.

ingrained in rural southern America that we as a small group can't affect it. It's not contradictory for a farmer to say he's nonviolent and also to pledge to shoot a marauder's head off." Yet "[t]he difference is," he reminded SNCC at its June meeting, "that we on the staff have committed ourselves not to carry guns." The group subsequently adopted his compromise: SNCC-workers and volunteers should remain nonviolent, but they should not attempt to impose their principles on locals.<sup>45</sup>

When the issue resurfaced at the orientation session in Ohio, Moses' views again held sway. He informed the volunteers of SNCC's decision, but acknowledged its practical difficulties by citing Camus' "grey area" between victims and executioners. "If you were in a house which was under attack, and the owner was shot, and there were kids there, and you could take his gun to protect them—should you? I can't answer that. I don't think anyone can." Bayard Rustin and James Lawson—both, like Moses, pacifists—then outlined the case for philosophical nonviolence, but Stokely Carmichael rebutted them. Most volunteers supported Carmichael, one volunteer wrote home: "I feel very strongly that [Lawson] does NOT represent the Movement...nonviolence is a perverted way of life, but a necessary tactic." After a heated debate, Moses stood up. "[A]s he spoke—slowly, gently—a subtle [and] permanent change came over the room," another documented, "He was ultimate reality and ultimate possibility. [He said:] 'In Mississippi we have two ground rules: 1) No weapons are to be carried or kept in your room. 2.) If you feel tempted to retaliate, please leave.' Questions were [now] resolved. The session ended."<sup>46</sup>

Fears about what lay ahead still troubled volunteers and staff. Many released their anxieties during late-night parties. Veteran staff members, a volunteer wrote, pushed "fears into the back of their minds by drinking, dancing, singing, telling jokes, and playing cards." Moses turned to folk dancing. Bob Cohen recalled "Bob leading a bunch of us in a Yugoslavian line dance to a record he had brought." Staughton Lynd noted how after leaving one "very somber" staff meeting they saw volunteers "dancing the *hora*. Without a word, Bob put down the papers he was carrying and joined."<sup>47</sup>

On June 22 Moses was addressing the second group when a SNCC staff member whispered something in his ear. He crouched and stared at his feet before standing and telling the volunteers: "Yesterday morning, three of our people left Meridian, Mississippi, to investigate a church-burning in [Philadelphia,] Neshoba County. They haven't come back, and we haven't had any word from them. We spoke to John Doar...He promised to order the FBI to act, but the local FBI still says they have been given no authority." It seemed, one volunteer recorded, as if Moses "was somewhere else; it was simply that he was obliged to say something, but his voice was automatic." A pale Rita Schwerner substituted for the shaken Moses and revealed the missing men's names: her own husband, twenty-four-year-old white CORE-worker Michael Schwerner; twenty-one-year-old black CORE-worker James Chaney from Meridian; and twenty-year-old white summer volunteer Andrew Goodman. Dazed, the volunteers split up to contact federal authorities. Moses left and sat down on the college cafeteria steps. He instinctively realized "they

<sup>45</sup> SNCC Executive Committee Meeting, April 18-19, 1964, minutes, Box 6, Folder 2, Ella Baker Papers; SNCC Executive Committee Meeting, June 11, 1964, minutes, Files #0887-0909, Reel 3, Series III, Staff Meetings, SNCC Papers; King, *Freedom Song*, 311-325; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 150-151.

<sup>46</sup> Sutherland-Martinez, ed., *Letters from Mississippi*, 15, 34-35; Vogel, "Notes of 1964 Orientation," Folder 1, Lise Vogel Papers; Eilen L. Barnes, "Account of Orientation at Western's Campus," File #23, Reel 2, Microfilm, Lucy Montgomery Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society; Cagin and Dray, *We Are Not Afraid*, 32.

<sup>47</sup> Terri Shaw, "Freedom Summer Recollections," and Terri Shaw, interview by Stephanie Scull Millet Shaw, June 7, 1999, transcript, Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi Collection, University of Southern Mississippi; Bob Cohen, "Sorrow Songs, Faith Songs, Freedom Songs: The Mississippi Caravan of Music in the Summer of '64" and Barbara Dane, "Michigan to Mississippi: A Journey," in *Freedom Is A Constant Struggle*, ed. Erenrich, 177-189, 222-227; Lynd, "Mississippi: 1961-1962," 8. Later that summer singer Barbara Dane likewise documented seeing "Moses [and] volunteers relaxing from all the tension by dancing the twist, the mashed potato, the hitchhike."

were dead...I knew that in my bones." According to Carmichael, "[h]e sat motionless, staring silently into space" for the rest of the afternoon.<sup>48</sup>

The Chaney-Schwerner-Goodman-story is the most well-known of Freedom Summer. It dominated headlines for two months. After the three investigated the burning of pro-civil rights Mt. Zion Methodist Church, deputy sheriff Cecil Price arrested and incarcerated them in sheriff Lawrence Rainey's jail for a trumped-up traffic charge. Around 10:30 p.m. Price released them after contacting Ray Edgar Killen, the ring leader of one of the White Knights' covert squads. Its Imperial Wizard, Sam Bowers, had already ordered Schwerner's death; as a pro-integrationist atheist of Jewish descent he considered Schwerner "a thorn in the flesh of everyone living." Price stopped the three again outside of town until Killen's squad arrived. They killed Schwerner and Goodman with a single shot and Chaney with three after beating him. They burned the trio's car, which local Choctaw tribe members found in a swamp on June 23. On August 4 their bodies were found in an earthen dam.<sup>49</sup>

Project critics, like columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, instantly blamed SNCC, in the same vein as SCLC had attracted criticism for victimizing children in Birmingham. Journalist Joseph Alsop charged that COFO "must have wanted, even hoped for, martyrs;" *The Washington Post* charged that the government was not "so apathetic, stupid, hypocritical or cowardly that it must be constrained to act by the threat of piling martyrs' corpses on its doorstep." Moses said in 1984 that Justice Department officials likewise pursued "the theme of Evans and Novak...that we were causing all of this." So "I reminded Burke [that] the campaign of terror really could be traced back to the summer of '63." In a memo to "project contacts" he reiterated that Freedom Summer had not caused but "simply revealed the terror" that "is a continuing fact of life."<sup>50</sup>

The accusations upset COFO-workers, particularly Moses. Vehemently denying them, they pointed to the many precautions they had taken. Thirty years later the charges still angered Moses: "I don't think people appreciate what [that accusation] means. Because, believe me, if it had been possible in any way...to stop [violence] from happening, it would have been done." In 1985 Dave Dennis compared it to warfare: "[W]hen you're in a war, you don't send soldiers out to be killed, you send soldiers out to win the war, hoping like hell that they're not gonna be killed." Ed King continued the military metaphor: "We did not want [the volunteers] as cannon fodder...we expected [the leaders] would be killed first." The decision to risk participants' lives had not been made lightly; as late as June SNCC-workers grappled with the realization that "[i]ts our hands and our minds that created a project that's going to stimulate violence." If COFO exploited anything, Moses admitted to the volunteers in Ohio, it was the sad reality that "you bring with you the concern of the country. It does not identify with Negroes. It identifies with whites." The volunteers well understood this. As one wrote home: "[W]e're not dupes...I am being used, but I know why and how, and will that Bob Moses so use me."<sup>51</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Belfrage, *Freedom Summer*, 11-12; Cagin and Dray, *We Are Not Afraid*, 320-321; *Freedom On My Mind*, directed by Connie Field and Marilyn Mulford, Clarity Educational Productions, 1994; "Whatsoever A Man Soweth," transcripts documentary on Mississippi by Dale Minor and Chris Koch for Pacific Radio, recorded on June 27, 1964, Files #0362-0372, Reel 20, Series VIII, Research Department, SNCC Papers; Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 373; Lewis and D'Orso, *Walking with the Wind*, 264.

<sup>49</sup> See Cagin and Dray, *We Are Not Afraid*, 1-46, 278-301; Marsh, *God's Long Summer*, 66-72. Both Price and Rainey were Knights-members.

<sup>50</sup> Bob Moses to "Friends of Freedom in Mississippi," memorandum, April 6, 1964, Files #1225-1226, Reel 38, Series XV, State Project Files, and Bob Moses to "Mississippi Summer Project Contacts," memorandum, June 27, 1964, File #0648, Reel 42, Series XVII, Other Organizations, SNCC Papers; "Mississippi—Summer of 1964: Troubled State, Troubled Time," *Newsweek*, July 13, 1964; "Mission to Mississippi," *The Washington Post*, June 25, 1964; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, July 30, 1984, Taylor Branch Papers. For criticism on SCLC in Birmingham, see among others Diane McWorther's *Carry Me Home*.

<sup>51</sup> "Mississippi—Summer of 1964: Troubled State, Troubled Time," *Newsweek*, July 13, 1964; Dave Dennis and Robert Moses, interviews by Blackside, Inc, November 10, 1985, and May 19, 1986, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries; Ed King,

The murders nonetheless shook the COFO-workers. “[I]t really took [the Project] into a different emotional space [and] level of commitment,” Moses reflected in 1994, “You have got to reevaluate your going into Mississippi in light of the knowledge that some in your crew are already dead before you even get there.” Ed King claimed that Moses “would not, almost could not, talk about Neshoba” for days. As with Herbert Lee and Louis Allen, he could not shake his feelings of guilt. In 2010 SNCC-photographer Matt Herron illustrated how much. Near the summer’s end he encountered Moses in Jackson for the first time in months: “So I greeted him effusively[:] ‘Bob, it’s great to see you! How are you?’ And he stopped me dead. He looked at me with these haunted eyes, and said: ‘Are you kidding?’ And I realized then that he carried the murder...with him through that whole summer. It absolutely haunted him, and colored everything that he did.” As Director of the Neshoba-area but absent that day, Dave Dennis felt the same: “[W]e would have been on top of it quicker if I had been there. The people...there just didn’t know what to do.” Aaron Henry, who had helped Moses to recruit Andrew Goodman at Queens College, felt especially responsible to his parents: “They lost [their] son because of me.”<sup>52</sup>

After his initial immobilization, however, Moses decided that “to give meaning to [the trio’s] lives” COFO should “make the project actually fulfill its goals.” Withdrawal was no option, he wrote the volunteers’ parents: “Negroes of Mississippi have suffered for decades from [this] kind of incident...Only our presence in Mississippi ensures the continued concern of the nation for the Negroes of that state.” He joined John Lewis and James Forman in calling the federal government and asked the volunteers and their parents to do likewise. He insisted they were “not looking for generalized chaos in which troops can come and take over” but “for a framework in which people can do their work.” He, Forman, Henry, Lawrence Guyot, and Charles Evers met CIA-director Allen Dulles in Jackson on June 25. Meanwhile FOS-groups held support demonstrations in New York, Chicago, and Boston. They planned civil disobedience in Washington too, but Moses “quietly” instructed national SNCC to reject the plans because it implied that COFO wanted to embarrass the government. Inciting “a steady stream of individuals to meet” with Burke Marshall, Robert Kennedy, and the President was more productive, he argued, since “there was already a sufficient statutory basis for the federal government to act.”<sup>53</sup>

Moses nonetheless pressed for increased legal action. On June 26 he and other COFO-members met with Arthur Kinoy and William Kunstler in Oxford. “We cannot sit here and do nothing,” Kinoy recalled Moses as saying, “Think of something! We want you to do something that says loud and clear we are not running...We’re hitting back!” They devised an unprecedented lawsuit, *COFO vs. Rainey*, on behalf of all local blacks against Lawrence Rainey and all “other [racist] country sheriffs in Mississippi.” Volunteer lawyers compiled affidavits from both locals like Fannie Lou Hamer and outsiders like Rita Schwerner and Mario Savio. COFO distributed copies of the brief for publicity. In August the lawyers filed a suit on behalf of Moses, Henry, Dennis, and SNCC’s Hunter Morey, challenging the new state laws passed “to hinder

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interviews by William Chafe, March 10 and October 30, 1988, transcript, Allard Lowenstein Papers; King, *Freedom Song*, 247, 318; “Last Summer in Mississippi,” *Redbook Magazine*, November 1964; Cagin and Dray, *We Are Not Afraid*, 30; *The Detroit Free Press*, June 22, 1964; Eugene Nelson, letter, June 26, 1964, Eugene Nelson Letters 1964, Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.

<sup>52</sup> Moses interview Biewen, American Radio Works, 1994; *Freedom On My Mind*, directed by Connie Field and Marilyn Mulford, Clarity Educational Productions, 1994; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 158; Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 373, 377; Matt Heron, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 17, 2010; Dittmer, *Local People*, 248-250; Aaron Henry, interview by Robert Wright, September 25, 1968, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University.

<sup>53</sup> Russell, *Black Genius and the American Experience*, 334; Bob Moses to parents volunteers, letter, no date, William Heath Papers; “Mississippi Summer Project—1964,” report by a student volunteer, no date, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, University of Southern Mississippi; Cagin and Dray, *We Are Not Afraid*, 321-322; Belfrage, *Freedom Summer*, 15; “Rights Workers Still Missing,” *The Student Voice* 5, no. 15 (June 30, 1964): 1, 3-4, in *The Student Voice*, ed. Carson, 163-166; Henry and Curry, *Aaron Henry*, 168-169; O’Reilly, “*Racial Matters*,” 167; King, *Freedom Song*, 388-390.

civil rights activities.” NLG-lawyer Victor Rabinowitz spoke with Moses and James Forman about lawsuits against Greenwood, Clarksdale, and Canton authorities.<sup>54</sup>

Moses further increased COFO’s safety precautions. He insisted that nobody should travel alone without leaving details of the destination. COFO installed a two-way radio system that linked its offices and its cars. Communications workers were instructed to call the Jackson office every two hours and maintain “instruction boards” with time lines when someone left. Moses reversed the decision to send volunteers to southwest Mississippi “until the reactions in the other part of the state were known.” A week later, however, he decided that COFO could not desert locals around McComb again. Since “[a]nyone who goes in faces a high probability of death,” he told *Newsweek*, experienced staff members went instead. “Then nobody can accuse us of sending [volunteers] in for the purpose of getting killed. Then the whole question will be whether the country will do for us and for Negro people what they have done for the volunteers.” He privately admitted that this deployment also provided a means for black staff members to “escape from the volunteers.” Remembering Ella Baker’s lessons about safeguarding what became “of the students in the long run,” he flew to California to recruit his Harlem friend Alvin Poussaint, now an established psychiatrist. He joined COFO’s medical team as a physician for staff and volunteers.<sup>55</sup>

Getting through to the volunteers was Moses’ biggest concern. After the burned car was found “I was sure they were dead,” he said in 1986, but “[b]ecause of [Rita] I really didn’t want to come out and say that. But then there were the volunteers. They had to be told the truth.” He and other staff “did their best to discourage our coming,” one volunteer wrote, “Moses said he wished they would find the bodies...just to make us fully realize what we were getting into.” During “one long ‘soul-session’ discussion,” another reported, “he sent us away for hours to rethink.” Some volunteers were shaken. “[T]houghts are going crazy,” one wrote. “Moses just told us now is the time to back out. Should I? I don’t know—I am scared shitless.” COFO’s medical staff reported “a noticeable increase” in “those openly anxious, fearful or unable to sleep soundly.”<sup>56</sup>

For some outsiders, however, the murders gave the Mississippi “adventure” a romantic aura. Reporters’ depiction of the volunteers as heroes encouraged this feeling. Across the nation various organizations announced plans to come to Mississippi in “carloads.” Even the NAACP spoke of sending “one thousand individuals.” Fearing chaos, Moses and Forman rushed to media outlets to discourage

<sup>54</sup> Mississippi’s ‘Freedom Summer’ Reviewed, conference October 30–November 2, 1979, transcript, Session 8, Folder 7, Mississippi’s ‘Freedom Summer’ Reviewed Collection; Cagin and Dray, *We Are Not Afraid*, 384–385; “Omnibus Rights Suit Filed Against Miss.,” *The Student Voice* 5, no. 21 (August 19, 1964): 1, 4, in *The Student Voice*, ed. Carson, 187, 190; Affidavits *COFO vs. Rainey* lawsuit, Files #0187–0195, Reel 63, and #0703–0704 and #0721, Reel 66, Appendix A: MFDP Papers, SNCC Papers; “United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit,” petition by Henry, Moses, and King, no date (likely spring 1964), and “United States District Court for the Southern District of Mississippi,” petition by Dennis, Moses, Henry, and Morey, Box 3, Folder 12, and Rabinowitz to Arthur Kunstler, Ben Smith, Moses, Forman, and Morey, letter, August 5, 1964, Box 3, Folder 4, Hunter R. Morey Papers.

<sup>55</sup> Lewis and D’Orso, *Walking with the Wind*, 265; Murphree, *The Selling of Civil Rights*, 66; Jim Kates and Alvin Poussaint, email interviews by author, May 25, 2009, and October 2010; Jim Kates, “June 1964” and “August 1964,” unpublished essays, in author’s possession; Cagin and Dray, *We Are Not Afraid*, 386; Hampton and Fayer, *Voices of Freedom*, 191; “Mississippi—Summer of 1964: Troubled State, Troubled Time,” *Newsweek*, July 13, 1964; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 10, 1983, Taylor Branch Papers; Moses interview Dittmer, 1983. In 2010 Alvin Poussaint said Moses had not only wanted him as a physician, but also to “spearhead the desegregation of hospitals and other health facilities” in Mississippi.

<sup>56</sup> Zoya Zeman, interview by John Rachal, April 18, 1996, transcript, and Jan Handke, report June 29, 1964, Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi Collection, University of Southern Mississippi; Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 372; Belfrage, *Freedom Summer*, 15; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Blackside, Inc., May 19, 1986, for *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years (1954–1965)*, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries, St. Louis, Missouri; Hampton and Fayer, *Voices of Freedom*, 190; Jim Kates, “June 1964” and “August 1964,” unpublished essays, in author’s possession; “Last Summer in Mississippi,” *Redbook Magazine*, November 1964; Robert Coles and Joseph Brenner, “American Youth in a Social Struggle: The Mississippi Summer Project,” report, no date, William Heath Papers; Sutherland-Martinez, ed., *Letters from Mississippi*, 38–39.



them. "People coming into Mississippi will not help the program as it has been developed and will not help black people," Moses stated. They helped best by remaining in the North, where they could "act as a force for political pressure." When people kept calling the FOS-offices, he reiterated on June 27 that "untrained and unoriented volunteers...would serve only to disrupt what is now a well-controlled plan of operation" because it would be "impossible for us to house them, supervise their activities, or protect them."<sup>57</sup>

After only a handful of volunteers quit, Moses addressed the group once more in a final speech that represented the quintessence of his leadership style. As Moses spoke, he hung his head and stared at his feet. Speaking slowly and softly, he made an analogy from J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*: "There is a weariness from constant attention to the things you are doing, the struggle of good against evil." His focus on Tolkien is revealing. It allowed him to express his emotions while hiding behind a fictitious character. His and Frodo's struggle in resisting an unwanted corrupting power, and the exhaustion of constantly battling evil, were essentially the same. His invocation of Tolkien, rather than the Bible, underscored Moses' cosmopolitan background and helped him to reach the northern students. This modern fantasy, written by an English professor of Anglo-Saxon literature, was becoming, in the mid-1960s, one of the most widely-read books among educated young people. Of all COFO-staff, Cleve Sellers noted, "Moses communicated best with the white students." In 1991 Moses related that he chose the book because "[i]t was fashionable to read when I was in graduate school [so many] college students knew [it]." It helped "to get them to understand what it was like, what SNCC-workers...were going through." It worked, one volunteer wrote home. "For those...who knew the book, it was a great and beautiful moment and it gave us an understanding which we might otherwise never have had." One volunteer called his speech a "near sacred moment" which "increased my commitment...The impact on me was riveting and life affecting." Another termed it "one of my most profound experiences of leadership...I would have done anything he asked me to do—I trusted him so much."<sup>58</sup>

Moses then said: "The kids are dead." He paused, one volunteer noted, "without regard for dramatic effect. But long enough for it to hit us." The group turned silent. "There may be more deaths," Moses added, and, after another pause, "I justify myself because I'm taking risks myself, and I'm not asking people to do things I'm not willing to do." Moreover, "people were being killed already, the Negroes of Mississippi, and I feel, anyway, responsible for their deaths." He cited Herbert Lee and Louis Allen. But "[i]f you are going to do anything about it," he sighed, "other people are going to be killed. No privileged group in history has ever given up anything without some kind of blood sacrifice." He again stared silently at the floor. "Obviously," one volunteer wrote home, his rationales "don't satisfy him...Moses almost seemed to be wanting all of us to go home." Moses then continued: "[I]n our country we have some real evil...If for any reason you're hesitant about what you're getting into, it's better for you to leave. Because what has got to be done has to be done in a certain way, or otherwise it won't get done." An "absolute" silence followed until a girl sang "They Say That Freedom Is a Constant Struggle." All stayed.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Murphree, *The Selling of Civil Rights*, 66; King, *Freedom Song*, 394-395. For Moses' June 27, 1964, statement, see also File #1099, Reel 38, Series XV, State Project Files, and File #0352, Reel 16, Series VII, Communications Department, Internal Communications, SNCC Papers.

<sup>58</sup> Cagin and Dray, *We Are Not Afraid*, 352-353; Belfrage, *Freedom Summer*, 25-26; McAdam, *Freedom Summer*, 72; Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 374; Sellers, *The River of No Return*, 82; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, February 15, 1991, transcript, Box 149, Taylor Branch Papers; Sutherland-Martinez, ed., *Letters from Mississippi*, 28-29, 36-37; Joseph Ellin, letter, June 28, 1964, Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi Collection, University of Southern Mississippi; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Blackside, Inc., May 19, 1986, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries; Heather Tobis Booth, email interview by author, November 2009; *Freedom On My Mind*, directed by Connie Field and Marilyn Mulford, Clarity Educational Productions, 1994.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

Ironically at this point COFO had already largely accomplished what it sought to achieve. Freedom Summer became a classic example of successful nonviolent direct action: it invited white retaliation but its effect on a national audience paradoxically inhibited new violence. In this the Neshoba-killings proved decisive. The visibility they brought poignantly confirmed Moses' justification for the Project: federal authorities and Mississippi's white elite finally determined to eradicate the state's terrorist groups. As Moses told *Newsweek*: "The country, unfortunately, moves only in response to acts of violence." He stated in August that, apart from southwest Mississippi, "there is little harassment of workers...We interpret that as meaning that police put out the word to local citizens." *The St. Louis Post Dispatch* called better police protection the Project's "most important gain." Even Governor Johnson, Senator Eastland, and Mayor Thompson publicly repudiated the violence. Economics, perhaps more than morality, changed their stance. After the murders, Gulf Coast tourism dropped by 50%, the State had to borrow \$8 million in expenses, and its tax revenues fell. Some factories even relocated offices to Louisiana to avoid "a Mississippi mailing address." Mississippi's reluctant compliance with the Civil Rights Act, historian John Dittmer noted, "marked the end of the policy of 'massive resistance.'"<sup>60</sup>

Yet neither the KKK nor local authorities surrendered easily. The FBI documented that COFO suffered 1,000 arrests, 35 shootings, and eight beatings during the short summer; COFO reported many more incidents of harassment. WATS-reports of a typical day in July for instance looked like this:

- JULY 2: Harmony: Cross burned, tacks strewn in Negro community (...)  
Hattiesburg: Two vote registration canvassers followed and questioned by men describing themselves as state officials (...) Local police stop Negro girl, five white boys en route home. Policeman curses, threatens arrest, slaps one boy  
Batesville: Panola County Sheriff Carl Hubbard detains several persons housing civil rights workers (...)  
Meridian: White teenage girl throws bottle at civil rights group outside church, cuts leg of local Negro girl  
Canton: Local police turn on sirens, play music on loudspeaker near COFO-office, fail to answer phone calls or highway patrol  
Gulfport: Two voter registration workers threatened (...) Man grabs volunteer's shirt: 'I'm going to whip your ass.' Workers run.

Another worker, volunteer Wayne Yancey, died in a suspicious car crash. In McComb alone, twenty-five bombings and burnings occurred. State officials kept targeting the Project as Communist-led and treated the trio's disappearance as a hoax. Senator Eastland even maintained that the three were "probably laughing up it on Moscow Gold in a New York hotel." They also dismissed the COFO-workers, sometimes literally: when Rita Schwerner, Ed King, and Bob Zellner tried to see Governor Johnson, Schwerner's WATS-report reads, he "slammed the door and locked it."<sup>61</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Carson, *In Struggle*, 123, 322; "Mississippi—Summer of 1964: Troubled State, Troubled Time," *Newsweek*, July 13, 1964; James Millstone, "Better Police Protection Called Most Important Gain in Summer of Rights Work in Mississippi," *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, August 13, 1964; Dittmer, *Local People*, 247-248, 314; "Mississippi Feels Pinch on Economy," *The Sunday Gazette-Mail*, December 20, 1964, Box 56, Folder 1, Carl and Anne Braden Papers; Martin and Victoria Nicolaus to friends, letter, February 19, 1965, Folder 1, Martin and Victoria Nicolaus Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 316.

<sup>61</sup> O'Reilly, "Racial Matters," 160, 166-167; Rubin, ed., *Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary* (Conference Booklet, April 15-18, 2010), 83, 91; Sellers, *The River of No Return*, 103-106; "Whatsoever A Man Soweth," transcripts documentary on Mississippi by Dale Minor and Chris Koch for Pacific Radio, recorded on June 27, 1964, Files #0362-0372, Reel 20, Series VIII, Research Department, and "Attempts to See Governor," WATS-report Rita Schwerner, June 25, 1964, File #0346, Reel 16, and "Mississippi Summer Project Running Summary of Incidents," report, June

This was not surprising considering how involved state authorities had been in the crime. In 1970 Governor Johnson admitted to having known that the trio would be taken out of jail to scare them, but that it had simply ended badly. Even Moses barely believed “the idea that at [that] level of the government...this was taking place.” The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission had distributed information on Schwerner to the KKK, and Sheriff Rainey blatantly refused to join the search or speak with the FBI. COFO’s compilation of its fifty calls to federal and state authorities showed the latter’s deliberate passivity. Prison employees denied the trio’s presence and the local FBI ignored COFO’s calls. The local FBI even refused action until late afternoon the next day: residential agent John Proctor ‘interviewed’ Cecil Price while enjoying smuggled liquor. It accordingly “took 24 hours—undoubtedly the critical 24 hours,” Moses told the volunteers in Ohio, “to get the Federal Government to act.”<sup>62</sup>

The White House seemed equally aloof. Rita Schwerner saw Allen Dulles in Jackson—for two minutes. On June 29 she met an unenthusiastic Lee White in Washington. “If you wish to talk with me,” White wrote President Johnson beforehand, “my secretary can get me out of the meeting.” Afterward he nonetheless brought her to the President. She asked him for “thousands of extra people,” Johnson told J. Edgar Hoover, but “I told her I [had already] put [in] all that we could efficiently handle.” He initially refused to meet the parents of Schwerner and Goodman too for fear “that [if] I start housemothering each kid that’s gone down there and that doesn’t show up...we’ll have this White House full of people every day.” He eventually agreed to see them because White reminded him that the visit was “highly publicized.” White reassured the President that “it would not be necessary to endorse the project [or] blame Mississippi.”<sup>63</sup>

President Johnson’s telephone transcripts reveal that the case deeply troubled him. The disappearance dominated his telephone calls for ten days. The calls betray his sense of powerlessness, as evidenced by his repetitive questions to each caller whether they thought the men were murdered. While irritated, however, he did not contradict Governor Paul Johnson’s and Senator James Eastland’s claims of a publicity stunt. He tried to walk a “tightrope” between segregationist Mississippians and the civil rights groups. “I’m doing what I can,” he sighed in one call, to “be as considerate of my fellow man as I can and still try to lead the nation.” But the civil rights groups made this impossible, he complained to Hoover: “[We have to] show the country that we are really working [on this] because if we don’t this crowd’s gonna demand everything in the world.”<sup>64</sup>

President Johnson subsequently ordered 400 marines to drag swamps for the bodies and sent 100 additional FBI-agents. He told Hoover he did not “want these Klansmen to open their mouth without your

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16-July 16, 1964, Files #0139-0142, Reel 17, Series VII, Communications Department, Internal Communications, SNCC Papers; Dittmer, *Local People*, 265-271; “McComb Shaken by Over 20 Bombings,” *The Student Voice* 5, no. 23 (November 25, 1964): 1, 4, in *The Student Voice*, ed. Carson, 199, 202.

<sup>62</sup> Ben Chaney, “Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman: The Struggle for Justice,” *Human Rights Magazine* 27, no. 2 (spring 2000); Paul B. Johnson, interview, September 18, 1970, Files #00432-00446, Reel 2, Part 3, Oral Histories, Papers Lyndon Johnson; Moses interview Dittmer, August 15, 1983; O’Reilly, “*Racial Matters*,” 164-166; Cagin and Dray, *We Are Not Afraid*, 336-365, 407-408; “COFO Contacts with Neshoba County Law Enforcement Officers in the Schwerner, Chaney, Goodman Case,” June 21-June 24, 1964, report, Files #0365-0366, Reel 16, Series VII, Communications Department, Internal Communications, and “Missing Mississippi Summer Project Workers: Chronology of Contacts with the Federal Government,” report, June 26, 1964, Files #0163-0167, Reel 14, Series VII, Communications Department, Public Relations, SNCC Papers; King, *Freedom Song*, 377-387; “Nation Mourns Slain Workers,” *The Student Voice* 5, no. 21 (August 19, 1964): 1, in *The Student Voice*, ed. Carson, 187.

<sup>63</sup> O’Reilly, “*Racial Matters*,” 166-167; Lee White to Lyndon B. Johnson, memoranda, June 23 and 29, 1964, Files #00099 and #00100, Reel 7, Part 1, White House Central Files, Papers Lyndon Johnson; Lyndon B. Johnson to Lee White, John McCormack, Nicholas Katzenbach, and J. Edgar Hoover on June 23, 1964, transcripts telephone calls in *Taking Charge*, ed. Beschloss, 425-427, 430-438. For this and next two paragraphs see also the Presidential Recording Program, Miller Center, University of Virginia (<http://millercenter.org/academic/presidentialrecordings>).

<sup>64</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson to Lee White, John McCormack, Nicholas Katzenbach, James Eastland, Paul Johnson, and J. Edgar Hoover on June 23, 1964, to Russell Long on July 20, 1964, to J. Edgar Hoover on June 24, 26, 29, and July 2, 1964, transcripts telephone calls, in *Taking Charge*, ed. Beschloss, 425-427, 430-441 444-445, 448-449, 458-459.

knowing.” The latter opened an FBI-office in Jackson for investigations but “most certainly not,” he assured *The Clarion-Ledger*, to “give protection to civil rights workers.” Yet the new agents, John Doar wrote, “were appalled by the breakdown in local law enforcement [and] ashamed of the Bureau’s prior performance.” They infiltrated the Klan and interviewed over 1,000 Mississippians, leading to the solving of the Neshoba-case and the breakup of the KKK. Paid informants revealed the men’s burial place and federal authorities arrested twenty whites. In 1967 seven of the suspects, including Cecil Price, were imprisoned for depriving the trio of their civil rights (but not for murder since homicide is a state and not a federal crime). In 2005 Ray Edgar Killen was retried and sentenced to 60 years for manslaughter. *The Saturday Evening Post* reported that by January 1965 the KKK’s membership in Mississippi had shrunk to 2,000.<sup>65</sup>

For COFO these successes did not outweigh the federal government’s initial reserve. “[I]f mass rioting breaks out in America you could attribute a lot of it to President Johnson’s handling of this case,” Dick Gregory thundered in *Ramparts*. John Lewis placed “the full responsibility for these deaths directly in the hands of the United States Justice Department and the [FBI].” In situations where local police was “in on the planning with the terrorists,” Moses likewise charged at SNCC’s Fall Conference, “the federal government is more willing to sacrifice the lives of Negroes...than it is to tamper with the structure of the government.” He told *Newsweek* that COFO-workers were “very bitter” over the federal government’s eventual response because it confirmed that the nation considered white lives more valuable than black ones. “We have been asking for [the FBI] for three years,” he had told the volunteers in Ohio, but only “now the federal government is concerned.” He tried to see its benefits because “there will be more protection for us, and hopefully for the Negroes who live there.” But only a saint would not have resented the fact that suddenly the AP, UPI, NBC, ABC, and CBS called COFO headquarters twice daily, and national papers like *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* now stationed reporters in Jackson. That the search for the bodies of the civil rights workers turned up other bodies—including those of two Alcorn student-activists missing since 1963—fuelled SNCC’s bitterness. “As soon as it was determined that these bodies were not the three,” Dave Dennis recalled in 1985, “those deaths were forgotten.”<sup>66</sup>

At James Chaney’s memorial service on August 7 Dennis ventured his anger. He tearfully proclaimed that he had “a bitter vengeance in my heart tonight [and] I’m not going to stand here and ask anybody...not to be angry!” While he did not say so out loud, he had reached “a point whereby I just could not anymore tell people to be nonviolent.” For most COFO-workers, James Forman recalled, Freedom Summer “confirmed the absolute necessity for armed self-defense.” Yet Moses’ influence prevailed. At a Greenwood staff meeting Stokely Carmichael, for example, went “to get the mandate from Bob” to arm himself. After the phone call, one observer noted, Carmichael returned “a different man.” As “calm and thoughtful as Moses himself, Stokely said, ‘What I think we ought to do is work harder on freedom registration forms.’” For the time-being Moses’ consensus-building approach still worked: since both disagreed on self-defense, he convinced Carmichael to focus instead on what they could agree on, the need for voter registration.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson to J. Edgar Hoover on July 2, 1964, transcript telephone call, in *Taking Charge*, ed. Beschloss, 448-449; O’Reilly, “Racial Matters,” 167-178; Jerry DeLaughter, “FBI Director Tells Plans For Our State,” *The Clarion-Ledger*, July 11, 1964; Jerry O’Leary, “Hoover, in Mississippi, Opens Big FBI Office,” *The Evening Star*, July 10, 1964; Doar and Landsberg, “The Performance of the FBI in Investigating Violations of Federal Laws Protecting the Right to Vote – 1960-1967”; Martin and Fairly, “We Got Nothing to Hide,” 27-33.

<sup>66</sup> O’Reilly, “Racial Matters,” 176, 192; Dick Gregory, interview, in “Mississippi Eye Witness” special edition of *Ramparts* 1964, 36-39; “Mississippi—Summer of 1964: Troubled State, Troubled Time,” *Newsweek*, July 13, 1964; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 163; Murphree, *The Selling of Civil Rights*, 67; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 62; Dave Dennis, interview by Blackside, Inc., November 10, 1985 for *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries.

<sup>67</sup> Dave Dennis, “Oration for Funeral of James Chaney,” in *Freedom Is A Constant Struggle*, ed. Erenrich, 360-363; Dave Dennis, interview by Blackside, Inc., November 10, 1985 for *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries; Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 26, 84; McAdam, *Freedom Summer*, 122-123; Belfrage, *Freedom Summer*, 182-183; Carson, *In Struggle*, 122-123.

### 8.3. This Is What It's All About

Focusing on grassroots empowerment helped Moses to persevere. On August 19 he stated that the Project was “eminently successful” in its goal of “the development of local leadership and staff who will help sustain projects.” Local participation in its parallel projects, he proudly noted, “was beyond our expectation.” In Leflore County, for example, where only two out of 123 blacks managed to become registered voters that summer, 3,384 signed up for COFO’s mock ‘freedom’ registration lists<sup>68</sup>. This constituted progress, Moses explained in *Pacific Scene*,

“in terms of what happens to the people we are working with...They don’t have any participation in society but they’ve found freedom. They can do things that they’ve wanted to do for a long time. They’ve been able to confront people who are on their backs. They take whatever is dished out—bombings, shootings, beatings, whatever it is. After people live through that they have a scope that they didn’t have before.”

Amzie Moore praised the Project as “the best thing that’s happened here since the 1940s.”<sup>69</sup>

Historian Charles Payne has pointed to COFO’s Freedom Schools—forty-seven of them enrolled 2,500 students aged seven to seventy—as proof of SNCC’s community-organizing tradition’s success. Charlie Cobb had envisioned the schools in November 1963 as a prolongation of Moses’ educational programs and as an attack on the “intellectual wastelands” that Mississippi’s existing black schools represented. Housed in shabby buildings without facilities, the latter used outdated teaching material and their teachers were sometimes almost as poorly-educated as their students. Black public school teachers, moreover, were notoriously reluctant to support the civil rights movement, and sometimes surreptitiously undermined it. The Freedom Schools served as parallel educational institutions, but also advocated social action. They taught participants “questions which take them inside into their own minds [to] get at attitudes that they have about themselves [and] white people,” Moses explained at Stanford, and thereby they could create “another basis [we could] operate from” in the future.<sup>70</sup>

The schools benefitted tremendously from Moses’ and SNCC’s skills in communicating the Mississippi Movement’s needs to outsiders with resources. With John Lewis and James Forman, Moses asked Broadway performers to sponsor them, and he contacted the United Federation of Teachers for “staff, funds, [and] equipment.” He approved Jane Stenbridge’s manual for the schools’ prospective teachers, sent pamphlets to the volunteers so they could involve “some church, civic or other group,” and sought the assistance of social scientists and education specialists at Boston and Yale Universities. He met Philip Stern in Washington to discuss the schools, and spoke with Myles Horton and the National Council of Churches about using Highlander and Mt. Beulah for a teachers’ meeting and additional workshops. With Ella Baker and COFO’s John O’Neal he discussed ways of “screening and recruitment of prospective teachers.” The curriculum was established at an NCC-sponsored conference in New York during March

<sup>68</sup> See Chapter 9.

<sup>69</sup> “Moses in Mississippi Raises Some Universal Questions,” *Pacific Scene*, February 3, 1965; “Statement of Robert Moses,” August 19, 1964, transcript, File #0699, Reel 43, Series XVII, Other Organizations, and “Mississippi Summer Project Ends, Mississippi Freedom Drive Begins,” news release, August 29, 1964, File #0196, Reel 13, Series Communications Department, Public Relations, SNCC Papers; King, *Freedom Song*, 482-483.

<sup>70</sup> Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 301-306; Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 441-442; Charlie Cobb, interview by John Rachal, October 21, 1996, transcript, Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi Collection, and Bob Moses, “Speech,” (West Coast Civil Rights Conference, April 23, 1964), transcript, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, University of Southern Mississippi; Dittmer, *Local People*, 259; Charlie Cobb, “Prospectus for a Summer Freedom School Program,” November 1963, Files #0022-0024, Reel 20, Series VIII, Research Department, and “Summer Freedom Schools in Mississippi,” memorandum Charles Cobb to SNCC Executive Committee, January 14, 1964, File #0456, Reel 63, Appendix A: MFDP Papers, SNCC Papers.

21-22, which Moses attended. Participants there at Moses' invitation included Myles Horton, Tim Jenkins, John Blyth, and programmed learning specialist Joan Countryman.<sup>71</sup>

Moses played a key role in the teachers' orientation program at Oxford too. He advised the volunteers "to be patient" with their pupils because "there is a distinction between being slow and being stupid, and the kids in Mississippi are very, very, very slow." He knew this from personal experience, but he was also influenced by Frank Riessman's "slow v. dull" theories in *The Culturally Deprived Child*, which SNCC's Mary Varela sent him beforehand. Moses emphasized that the teachers should not expect too much. If they could "break off a little chunk of a problem," he said, and "make some steps in examining it thoroughly, then [you] will have accomplished something really significant." He again appealed to his book drive donors, and the French Embassy contacted him about donating French teaching aids. The influx of books fascinated the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, which reported nervously that those "addressed to Robert Moses" included Robert Williams' *Negroes With Guns* and C. Wright Mills' *The Marxists*.<sup>72</sup>

The curriculum included neither Williams nor Mills, but, one historian confirmed, "embraced a radical pedagogy and a radical philosophy" that reflected Moses' thinking. The schools' essence, one volunteer explained in 2009, "was enabling the students to formulate...their own thoughts [and this] was certainly Moses' way." The curriculum was based on pupils' "everyday lives" but built "up to a more realistic perception of American society, themselves, the conditions of their oppression, and alternatives offered by the Freedom Movement." This was done through questions like "How is Bob Moses like Moses in the Bible?" and "Why doesn't Mrs. Hamer stay in the North once she gets there to speak?" COFO advised the volunteers to utilize their own skills and teach what the students requested. The schools, historian Barbara Ransby argued, represented "an extension of [SNCC's] decentralized structure." There were no set opening times and no traditional discipline. Under the influence of Northern educators the schools prioritized remedial work in literacy and math, but leadership development was never forgotten. In typing classes students wrote "freedom newspapers," and French was used "to develop grammar and phonetic skills" in English, which would benefit job searches.<sup>73</sup>

All schools experienced failures and successes,<sup>74</sup> but overall, historian John Dittmer stated, they

<sup>71</sup> King, *Freedom Song*, 441; Jane Stembridge, "Notes on Teaching in Mississippi," no date, and Moses to accepted volunteers, memorandum, no date, William Heath Papers; Moses to Vernon Eagle (New World Foundation), letter, May 27, 1964, File #1017, Reel 69, Moses to Dick Parrish (UFT), letter, March 10, 1964, File #1225, Reel 9, Moses to Philip Stern and Robert Cohen (Boston University), May 1, 1964, File #0486, Reel 67, and Moses to Charles McCarthy (Yale), May 1, 1964, and Liz Fusco (Freedom School Coordinator) to Myles Horton, letter, September 2, 1964, File #0465, Reel 67, and Matthew Holden (University of Pittsburgh) to Moses, letter, May 21, 1964, File #0265, Reel 67, and "People Invited to the Curriculum Conference," report, no date, File #0605, Reel 64, Appendix A: MFDP Papers, and Moses, Lewis, and Forman to "Theatre Group for SNCC," letter, no date, File #1020, Reel 1, Series I, Chairman Files John Lewis, SNCC Papers; Ransby, *Ella Baker & The Black Freedom Movement*, 327.

<sup>72</sup> John O'Neal to Ella Baker, letter, April 13, 1964, File #1549, Reel 69, Mary Varela to Bob Moses, no date (likely spring 1964), File #0574, Reel 67, letter Bob Moses to Valida Diehl, March 6, 1964, File #0130, Reel 64, and Edouard Morot-Sir to Bob Moses, letter, September 11, 1964, File #0466, Reel 68, Appendix A: MFDP Papers, SNCC Papers; Cagin and Dray, *We Are Not Afraid*, 353; Vogel, "Notes of 1964 Orientation," Lise Vogel Papers; Murphree, *The Selling of Civil Rights*, 74; Tom Scarbrough, "Lafayette—Marshall Counties," investigative report, May 19, 1964, Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission Online, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, MS, [http://mdah.state.ms.us/arrec/digital\\_archives/sovcom/](http://mdah.state.ms.us/arrec/digital_archives/sovcom/) (accessed November 22, 2007).

<sup>73</sup> Paul Lauter, email interview by author, April 13, 2009; Ransby, *Ella Baker & The Black Freedom Movement*, 327-328; Liz Fusco, "Freedom Schools in Mississippi, 1964," report, no date, Files #0005-0008, Reel 39, and Staughton Lynd, "Mississippi Freedom Schools: Retrospect and Prospect," report, July 26, 1964, Files #0332-0337, Reel 38, Series XV, State Project Files, and "Citizenship Curriculum," report, no date, File #0133, "Resources for Teaching Negro History," report, no date, File #0029, "Overview of the Freedom Schools," memorandum from Mississippi Summer Project Staff, May 5, 1964, Files #0044-0045, Reel 20, Series VIII, Research Department, SNCC Papers; Rothschild, *Northern Volunteers and the Southern Freedom Summers*, 115-127; Dittmer, *Local People*, 261.

<sup>74</sup> With 600 students, the Hattiesburg one was the most successful. Rural schools, like in Shaw, had more problems: few



“stand out as a major achievement.” On August 6 Moses attended a three-day Freedom School Convention in Meridian. Each school sent three student representatives and a coordinator. The Holly Springs school performed a play about Medgar Evers. Speakers included A. Philip Randolph and James Forman. Moses merely “asked questions” to help students “articulate what they wanted for the future.” He gleefully watched as the students formed committees to formulate a platform for the Mississippi Movement’s new political party. “It was the single time in my life that I have seen Bob happiest,” Staughton Lynd observed, “He just ate it up...He just thought this was what it was all about.”<sup>75</sup>

Moses described the establishment of sixteen community centers statewide, one volunteer recalled, as additional tools for “[creating] a parallel society.” Like the Freedom Schools they had a dual function. For youth they provided daycare, educational assistance, and recreation, but gave adults leadership training, political education, job training, and help with health and social security problems. Moses’ own involvement was limited to enlisting his uncle Bill to construct one center and, through Myles Horton, in recruiting two wealthy Californians to provide a building crew and job training for locals in Mileston.<sup>76</sup>

As Moses had hoped, the schools and centers were of lasting significance to the locals participating in them. Some even became scholars or news anchors later in life. Several centers stayed open after the summer, but others faltered for lack of facilities, money, and local personnel. To continue them, COFO’s reports confirm, it had “to find support in large doses from outside of the state.” The schools did continue into the fall and were revived in the 1965 summer. “I have learned...much more this summer than I learned in many, many years,” one teenager wrote elated, “Freedom School ment more to me then I can explain.”<sup>77</sup>

Moses made sure to include music and drama. He helped to recruit forty New York musicians for a “Caravan of Music.” Bob Cohen, Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, Judy Collins, and other singers taught musical workshops and performed spirituals at Freedom Schools and community centers. To encourage locals’ artistic aspirations, Moses helped organize a folk and drama festival in early August at which they

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showed up because regular school was held simultaneously (so black pupils could pick cotton in the fall), teachers had a high turn-over rate because they were unsatisfied with the slow pace that SNCC’s community organizing demanded, and parents used the schools as daycare centers. Successful schools unintentionally created a “super-bureaucracy and a tendency toward more ‘conventional’ methods of teaching” as large numbers even led to “bells between classes.” (Dittmer, *Local People*, 260; Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 305-306; Rothschild, *Northern Volunteers and the Southern ‘Freedom Summers,’* 134-137; Sutherland-Martinez, ed., *Letters from Mississippi*, 118; Wally to Staughton Lynd, letter, July 11, 1964, File #0242, Reel 68, Appendix A: MFDP Papers, SNCC Papers).

<sup>75</sup> Rothschild, *Northern Volunteers and the Southern ‘Freedom Summers,’* 138-140; Dittmer, *Local People*, 260-261; Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 441-442; Kathy Emery, et al., *Lessons from Freedom Summer: Ordinary People Building Extraordinary Movements* (Monroe: Common Courage Press, 2008), 278-297. The eight committees that formulated their ideas for the platform for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party centered on public accommodations, housing, education, health, foreign affairs, federal aid, job discrimination, and voting.

<sup>76</sup> “Mississippi Summer Project—1964,” report by a student volunteer, no date, and Zoya Zeman, interview by John Rachal, April 18, 1996, transcript, Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi Collection, University of Southern Mississippi; “Outline of Plans for 1964 for Maureen Murphy,” report, December 1963, Folder 1, Mendy Samstein Papers; “The COFO Community Centers,” report, no date (likely spring 1964), Files #0707-0717, Reel 21, Series VIII, Research Department, and “Mileston Community Center,” report, no date, File #0540, Reel 63, Appendix A: MFDP Papers, SNCC Papers; “Harmony Builds Center,” *The Student Voice* 5, no. 20 (August 12, 1964): 3, in *The Student Voice*, ed. Carson, 185; Sutherland-Martinez, ed., *Letters from Mississippi*, 129, 132; Belfrage, *Freedom Summer*, 94; Inter-Office Memorandum by Community Center Staff Martha, Claire, and Betty, July 8, 1964, Box 1, Folder 3, COFO Panola County Office Records; “Project Proposal for Mississippi for the Summer of 1964,” no date, James Forman Papers, Library of Congress; Myles Horton to Bob Moses, February 26, 1964, letter, and Penny Patch to Horton, March 18, 1964, Box 9, Folder 23, Highlander Research and Education Center Collection.

<sup>77</sup> “Progress and Problems of the COFO Community Centers,” report, Summer 1964, Files #0558-0559, Reel 63, and Bessie Mae Herring, “What the Summer Project Ment to Me,” report, no date, File #0576, Reel 68, Appendix A: MFDP Papers, SNCC Papers; Dittmer, *Local People*, 261; Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 441.

could perform. Cohen served as coordinator and Sam Block and Willie Peacock as co-directors. Moses was program chair and secured the festival site. Three other SNCC-workers founded the integrated Southern Free Theater, and travelled the state performing Martin Duberman's play, *In White America*. In Ruleville blacks organized a Freedom Festival at which Freedom School pupils read self-written poems and performed plays, including "a puppet play in which the valiant knight Bob Moses fought the wicked witch Segregation."<sup>78</sup>

Moses' vision of long-term social change encompassed local whites. During SNCC's April meeting he had announced that "we must begin to think about opening up white communities." He wanted SSOC (Southern Student Organizing Committee), a new organization of southern whites founded by SNCC's Sam Shirah, to initiate work-study programs on white campuses and to work in Mississippi's white communities as an autonomous affiliate of SNCC. Stokely Carmichael and others opposed a SSOC affiliation, but SNCC agreed to finance SSOC's projects for COFO in Jackson and Biloxi<sup>79</sup>. Moses supported the projects out of idealism *and* political realism. Since one-third of Mississippi's poor was white, they should unite with their black counterparts. As he explained in 1982, it "was the only way I saw out of the impasse we came to politically in this race question." He also hoped that the projects would diminish "black-white tensions" in SNCC by demonstrating to black staff members that white workers would be "facing the same dangers they are, but in white communities." Some COFO-workers, however, just saw the projects as a convenient way of keeping whites out of black ones.<sup>80</sup>

Internal racial tensions remained present throughout the summer. "[T]he space in the black community was really not a completely welcoming space," Moses recalled in 1994, "so [the volunteers] had to figure out how to walk through that [and it] is to their everlasting credit that they did." Culture shock added to their difficulty in adapting. "I really can't stand it here," one volunteer wrote, "the SNCC field staff with their cold, emotionless eyes and blank, beaten faces...the filthy, vermin-infested living conditions in Ruleville [and blacks'] hopelessness and apathy." Yet tensions were submerged for the time being because most locals treated the volunteers affectionately. According to Charles Payne, this approach evidenced the direct "influence of southern Black culture on the movement" as black Southerners were "sensitive to how social structure shape contradictions in people" and "to people as...potentially changing."<sup>81</sup>

<sup>78</sup> Cohen, "Sorrow Songs, Faith Songs, Freedom Songs," and George W. Chilcoat and Jerry A. Ligon, "Developing Democratic Citizens: The Mississippi Freedom Schools," in *Freedom Is A Constant Struggle*, ed. Erenrich, 177-189, 107-137; "Singers Open Mississippi Freedom School," News Release, July 9, 1964, File #0179, "Folk Festival in Mississippi," News Release, File #0720, Reel 3, Series III, Communications Department, Public Relations, and Judy Walborn, "Freedom School Report," July 15, 1964, File #0502, Reel 67, Ralph D. Ford, James A. Betts, and Lewis S. Flagg to Moses, letters, July 20, 22, and 24, 1964, Files #1246-1247, Reel 69, Appendix A: MFDPP Papers, SNCC Papers; Moses to Ben Griffin, letter, July 18, 1964 and Erle Johnston, "COFO Musical and Dramatics Festival," memorandum, July 20, 1964, Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission Online, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, MS, [http://mdah.state.ms.us/arrec/digital\\_archives/sovcom/](http://mdah.state.ms.us/arrec/digital_archives/sovcom/) (accessed November 22, 2007).

<sup>79</sup> White organizers contacted local whites in Jackson and Biloxi "through labor organizations, churches, service and civic organizations, and canvassing in working-class communities." Neither project was successful due to the organizers' inexperience, ignorance in the white community, and their association with COFO (SSOC later allied with SDS). (Ed Hamlett, "White Folk's Project," report, no date, Files #0576-0577, and "White Community Project Workshop," report, no date (likely July 1964), File #0577-0578, Reel 63, Appendix A: MFDPP Papers, SNCC Papers)

<sup>80</sup> SNCC Executive Committee Meeting, April 18-19, 1964, Minutes, Box 6, Folder 2, Ella Baker Papers; Carson, *In Struggle*, 102-103, 118-119; Moses interview Carson, 1982; Bruce Maxwell, "We Must Be Allies...Race Has Led Us Both to Poverty," report, no date (likely fall 1964), Box 2, Folder 7, Howard Zinn Papers; Lewis and D'Orso, *Walking with the Wind*, 250.

<sup>81</sup> Moses interview Biewen, American Radio Works, 1994; Alvin Poussaint, interview by KZSU Radio Station Stanford University, 1965, transcript, KZSU Project South Interview Collection, Microfiche 2479 (E), Library of Congress, Washington DC; Wally to Staughton Lynd, letter, July 11, 1964, File #0242, Reel 68, Appendix A: MFDPP Papers, SNCC Papers; Dittmer, *Local People*, 264; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 301, 306-315; Carson, *In Struggle*, 116-117. See also Sally Beltrage's *Freedom Summer* and Elisabeth Sutherland-Martinez' *Letters from Mississippi*.

During the orientation and in memoranda COFO-workers had advised the volunteers on how to handle locals. Moses characteristically suggested that they “merely facilitate events and not try to do everything themselves.” James Forman told them not to address locals on a first-name basis and “to help with household chores.” Historian-activist Vincent Harding warned them not to “‘use’ each other emotionally and sexually;” Stokely Carmichael pointed out that many black southerners disapproved of alcohol and advised the volunteers to avoid it. SCLC’s Annelle Ponder advised on “manners, dress, religion and church.” Others told the volunteers to “encourage people to speak up,” “go slowly enough to include everyone,” and “praise people freely.” The training encouraged volunteers not to treat blacks, as Robert Penn Warren put it, as “an abstraction” that they could “decorate with certain self-indulgent theories, feelings, and fantasies, like a Christmas tree.” Some whites nonetheless displayed attitudes that were similar to the national media’s portrayal of the Project, that is, “nostalgic, romantic, oversimplified.” Some even tried to become “more Negro than Negroes.” Moses recalled that such whites “became objects of amusement” in COFO, but also invoked “suspicion as to their motives.”<sup>82</sup>

Veteran staff members were sometimes guilty of romanticism too. James Forman derisively called this “local people-itis,” the idea that “local people could do no wrong,” and that “no-one, especially somebody from outside the community, should initiate any kind of action or assume any form of leadership.” Such romanticism always existed within SNCC, recalled Julian Bond, “a great mystique of working with the rural poor under great danger.” When staff-members could not “bear to hurt the delicate sensitivities of a group of local youths” who had disrupted the COFO-office, some workers penned a furious memo that condemned this “Bourgeois sentimentality.” This kind of “middleclass paternalism,” its authors wrote, implied that “we done been ‘prived so long that we is not capable of observing simple rules of discipline and must be excused for anything we do.” The youth’s elevation to “the miraculous, the rare and into totally overwhelming sacred cows...bewilders and sickens us,” they went on. “If you been poor you know damned well there ain’t no nobility in that.” Jane Stemberidge likewise complained that those “who think it is glorious to put on levis and identify with the people...are full of shit.”<sup>83</sup>

Lyrical words about the potential of grassroots leadership occasionally led movement insiders and outsiders to accuse Moses of romantization too. In *The Village Voice* Moses described Mississippi’s “pure and uncorrupted sharecroppers” as “the greatest source of strength for the Movement.” He told reporter Jack Newfield that he and his wife planned to travel Mississippi next year “teaching Negroes about themselves, those poor, simple folks on the bottom no-one trusts...I’ll get them to write about their lives, and I’ll send some of it to you because it will be so poetic.” He particularly attracted criticism for his unbounded faith in Fannie Lou Hamer. “Even the usually level-headed, reserved Bob Moses,” her biographer Chana Kai Lee concurred, “tended to blur the distinction between what Hamer was actually doing and the immensity of her mobilizing potential.”<sup>84</sup>

Some volunteers found it difficult to hide their belief that locals could not do it themselves, or at least that they could do it *better*. “[T]here is a kind of Jesus Christ complex that many middle-class

<sup>82</sup> Rothschild, *Northern Volunteers and the Southern ‘Freedom Summers,’* 67; “The Volunteers for Mississippi Learn Some Vital Do’s and Don’ts,” *The New York Herald Tribune*, June 17 1964; Vogel, “Notes of 1964 Orientation,” Lise Vogel Papers; King, *Freedom Song*, 376; “Re: Adult Program,” memorandum Annelle Ponder, no date, Box 1, Folder 3, COFO Panola County Office Records; Belfrage, *Freedom Summer*, 42; “Techniques for Field Work,” report, no date, Box 1, Folder 2, Catherine Clarke Civil Rights Collection; Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 315; Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?* 120; Staughton Lynd, “Freedom Summer: A Tragedy, Not a Melodrama,” in *Freedom Is A Constant Struggle*, ed. Erenrich, 484; Edward Brown, interview by Harold O. Lewis, June 30, 1967, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University; Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 101.

<sup>83</sup> Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 422; Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 275; “SNCC’s Goals and [Bourgeois] Sentimentality,” paper, no date (likely fall 1964), Folder 2, Stuart Ewen Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society; Jane Stemberidge to Mary King, letter, April 21, 1964, Box 3, Folder 3, Mary King Papers.

<sup>84</sup> Jack Newfield, “Moses in Mississippi: The Invisible Man Learns his Name,” *The Village Voice*, December 3, 1964; Lee, *For Freedom’s Sake*, 72-73.

whites bring to their relations with people whom they consider oppressed,” one volunteer acknowledged in a letter. Another noted that the volunteers had “fresher energy than the veterans,” and “less patience with a casual approach.” “The inefficiency of people running their own shows tends to bug Northerners,” her colleague agreed, so “the tendency is to step in.” Most such cases were relatively mild, volunteer Paul Lauter recalled in 2009, citing volunteers who had “learned a lot about black history [and] wanted to tell it to the [Freedom School] kids” instead of letting them “express their own thoughts.” Other examples were more severe. “[W]hite college-educated Northerners have a tendency to take command of an assembly through rapid-fire parliamentary [maneuvers],” another volunteer wrote home, “which leave local people baffled and offended.” In Vicksburg a volunteer even lectured its native project director on “local problems as if they were issues that had arisen in a college seminar.” The volunteer left Mississippi after Moses chose the director’s side.<sup>85</sup>

Consequently, James Farmer recounted in 1965, “local people pulled out.” They felt “inferior,” native SNCC-worker Mary Lane explained in 1969: “After these people came in, you could see...it every day, ‘the man’ moving up a little more...and you find out that they can do a much better job of it than you could.” In 1965 Ulysses Everett, another native worker, recalled his anger when he returned to the Hattiesburg SNCC-office after having spent months in jail. Everything was “completely changed from what it was. And you see all these kids around, typing, you know, talking [but] I didn’t understand what they was talking about, because I didn’t have an education. I couldn’t type [but for us] it was worth something just being in the office working.” He fled to the project in Laurel. COFO allowed such withdrawals because the volunteers’ skills ensured that things could be done faster. As during the Freedom Vote, the Project’s short time span demanded the skills of educated whites but may have weakened local leadership.<sup>86</sup>

While COFO had predicted such strife, it had underestimated the impact of the black community’s internal class differences on the acceptance of the volunteers. Locals’ willingness to accept veterans’ and volunteers’ flaws decreased the higher one got on the social ladder. Despite Moses’ advise to locate “doctors, teachers, ministers, beauticians etc. and try to involve them in the program,” the Summer Project exacerbated tensions between COFO and the black middle class. Although workers adapted their behavior to middle-class mores, a minority rubbed against them through partying, inappropriately casual dress, or acting “snobbish.” Moses and Bill Hansen had to travel to the Gulf Coast projects to in order to squelch locals’ complaints “about sex and drinking” in the COFO-projects. Laurel’s NAACP president, Dr. B.E. Murph, described workers’ “erratic irresponsibility” in an angry letter to Gloster Current. They preyed on “our membership,” he charged, and displayed amoral behavior including “vivacious looking white girls who smiled at everyone without provocation,” and “boys who smoked” and played dice. They painted the NAACP-building without permission, stocked the library with “trashy novels,” and left clutter. “The story... is the same all over the State. It is worse in some places. They have taken over the Civil Rights Program,” Murph concluded dismayed, “COFO Must Go!”<sup>87</sup>

<sup>85</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 261-263; Edith Black and Jay Lockard, interview by KZSU Radio Station Stanford University, 1965, transcript, KZSU Project South Interview Collection, Microfiche 2479 (E), Library of Congress; Paul Lauter, email interview by author, April 13, 2009; Martin and Victoria Nicolaus to Friends, letter, December 9, 1964, Folder 1, Martin and Victoria Nicolaus Papers; Lewis and D’Orso, *Walking with the Wind*, 249; Sutherland-Martinez, ed., *Letters from Mississippi*, 235.

<sup>86</sup> Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?* 120; Mary Lane, interview by Robert Wright, July 12, 1969, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University; Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 335-336; Ulysses Everett, interview by KZSU Radio Station Stanford University, 1965, transcript, KZSU Project South Interview Collection, Microfiche 2479 (E), Library of Congress.

<sup>87</sup> “Notes from Bob Moses,” no date (likely January 1964), James Forman Papers, Library of Congress; Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 241; Dittmer, *Local People*, 263-264; “Letters from Mississippi with regard to sexual tensions,” report, William Heath Papers; Minutes 5<sup>th</sup> District Meeting, November 25, 1964, Box 14, Folder 1, CORE Records; Dr. B.E. Murph to Bishop Stephen Gill Spottswood (NAACP Chairman of the Board of Directors in New York), letter, no date (likely November 1964), Reel 10, Group III, Box C-74, Part 27 Selected Branch Files, Microfilm, Records NAACP.

Other NAACP-members had reached similar conclusions. In July Charles Evers asked Moses for manpower for a citizenship school and “any cooperation you could give us as a real effort towards freedom in Jackson.” Moses accepted, but insisted that it should be “a CORE-SNCC-NAACP project” based on “group decision-making.” Believing in top-down leadership like “a lawyer leads his witness,” however, Evers rejected such restrictions and decided to refuse involvement with COFO and Freedom Summer altogether. Relations between the national NAACP and SNCC also deteriorated. After the mid-July race riots in Harlem President Johnson asked the national civil rights organizations for a moratorium on demonstrations until after his reelection. To the dismay of the President and of the moderate civil rights organizations, John Lewis and James Farmer refused. The NAACP in turn angered SNCC for testing the Civil Rights Act in Jackson, Clarksdale, and Mississippi’s Gulf Coast. Despite outward unity, Gloster Current now frankly advised Charles Evers to “encourage Dr. Henry to wean himself away from [COFO]” and to “review our relationship with that outfit at the end of the summer.”<sup>88</sup>

When NAACP members did participate in COFO activities, SNCC sometimes resented it. In Batesville, for example, SNCC-workers complained that the community center was “too exclusively of the educated people. The majority are teachers and pretty much dominate the goings and doings.” Rather than welcoming such participation as evidence of local leadership, SNCC deplored it. This attitude revealed some of the complexities and contradictions of SNCC’s strategy for producing social change. If it perceived the level of locals’ education and income a threat to democracy, then who represented “local people” and what did this mean for the Mississippi Movement’s survival? The answer became painfully apparent when the divide between middle and working class blacks and the lingering tensions between the civil rights organizations unintentionally came to a head in the Summer Project’s political program.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 178, 274-279; Crosby, *A Little Taste of Freedom*, 85-88, 174, 214-216; Charles Evers to Bob Moses, letter, July 13, 1964, File #1240, and Moses to Evers, letter, no date, File #1242, Reel 69, Appendix A: MFDP Papers, SNCC Papers. Charles Evers had even attempted to organize an independent summer program. John Lewis justified the decision not to honor a moratorium on demonstrations by pointing out that SNCC could not decide anything for “individual Negro communities in which we are not working.” (“SNCC, CORE Refuse Action Moratorium,” *The Student Voice* 5, no. 19 (August 5, 1964): 1, 4, in *The Student Voice*, ed. Carson, 179, 182)

<sup>89</sup> Claire O’Connor, Community Center Batesville, report, August 6, 1964, Box 1, Folder 3, COFO Panola County Office Records.





## 9. The Stuff Democracy Is Made Of

### 9.1. Building the MFDP

The Summer Project's political program consisted of running black candidates for the June 2 primaries and establishing a political party, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). The MFDP planned to challenge the seating of the regular state Democrats at the Democratic National Convention (DNC), to be held in Atlantic City on August 22-27. Moses saw the MFDP as the quintessential vehicle for building grassroots leadership that could endure. "What made [the FDP<sup>1</sup>] radical was...the effort at encouraging this group to empower itself," he reflected in 2001. "No matter how great Martin Luther King, Jr. was, he could not go and challenge the seating of the Mississippi Democrats...[The] only people who could [lead the Challenge] were the people from Mississippi." Such a challenge would refute the claims of Mississippi politicians like James Eastland that blacks were content with the status quo. As Moses put it, the allegation that COFO was "trying to get these people to do something they don't want" could not be countered "without the people themselves."<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, out-of-state forces and cosmopolitan-educated organizers within the Movement—especially Moses himself—played a larger role in the Challenge's realization than historians or movement participants acknowledge. An analysis of these influences exposes not only the close correlation of top-down and bottom-up organizing, but it also helps to appreciate more fully why Moses and SNCC-workers felt so betrayed by what transpired in Atlantic City.

The MFDP exemplified Moses' 'parallel structures'-concept. The regular, all-white state Democratic Party held precinct, county, district, and state elections throughout the summer to choose its delegates for the Democratic National Convention. There, delegations from all states elected their presidential and vice-presidential nominees for the November general elections. Mississippi blacks would attempt to vote in the state party's elections; if, as expected, they were excluded, party bylaws allowed them to form their own party (the MFDP) and choose their own delegates. Because the MFDP's elections were open to everyone of voting age regardless of race or literacy qualifications, they could claim at the DNC that their delegates truly represented the state's population, and that the Mississippi seats therefore belonged to them. Evidence of exclusion would also strengthen demands for stronger voting rights legislation and facilitate federal lawsuits to nullify state election results. The Challenge thus paradoxically depended on a trust in the federal government that COFO-workers increasingly doubted. Whereas the Challenge was a one-time, nationally-oriented affair, the MFDP itself was founded as a lasting instrument for grassroots empowerment. It was designed, its organizers wrote, to be a state-wide "people's organization." Ordinary members would determine its leadership, which would be "responsible at all times for all its decision[s] to its people."<sup>3</sup>

The idea of the Challenge initially met resistance within SNCC. Figuring that the white power structure was too powerful, Stokely Carmichael recalled that "when Bob first raised the idea...Folks thought he was nuts. Or fantasizing." SNCC had backed Congressional candidates in Albany, Selma, Danville, and Enfield (North Carolina), but no other SNCC-projects entertained the idea of a major political effort like the MFDP. This was partly because other Southern state Democratic Parties at least claimed some kinship with the national Democratic Party and had 'token' black representation. But most SNCC-projects also lacked the manpower, finances, state-wide coordination, and a cosmopolitan-educated Director with nationwide

<sup>1</sup> Movement participants alternately used the names Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and Freedom Democratic Party and their subsequent abbreviations, MFDP and FDP, without distinction throughout the party's existence. Both abbreviations are likewise used in this dissertation.

<sup>2</sup> Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 20; Russell, *Black Genius*, 334-335.

<sup>3</sup> Report on MFDP, no date (likely Fall 1964), Folder 1, Mendy Samstein Papers; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 176-177.

contacts. “No-one could develop the program Bob has,” Don Harris admitted at SNCC’s June meeting. Consequently, for a long time the Challenge lived mostly in Moses’ mind.<sup>4</sup>

Although COFO-workers had spoken of the Challenge since the Freedom Vote, nothing concrete developed until late December 1963. Memoranda and minutes of subsequent meetings confirm how much the enterprise depended on organizers with broad visions in its first stages. During SNCC’s December 27-31 meeting Moses broached the need for a plan centered on “the breakup of the Dixiecrats,” because “[t]he money for real change, e.g. in education, has to come from the federal government, and won’t without a change in Congress.” It was an issue which, Moses knew from his 1950s’ summer camps, “had long floated in New York politics” and would likely find support there. He and James Bevel had discussed forming “an ad hoc group to plan strategy for the conventions and to agitate there.” They considered involving Bayard Rustin, a consummate networker who shared their desire to marginalize the Dixiecrats. SNCC declined to commit itself because of “the rather nebulous nature of the proposal,” but it liked the idea of capitalizing on “Rustin’s organizational talents and national image.” Moses then joined Mendy Samstein in Atlanta to learn “how the regular Democratic Party elected their delegation.” After all, the latter admitted in 1966, this “was a complete mystery [to us].” They researched “Bill Higgs’ political handbook” and asked white Northerner Rachele Horowitz of the Workers’ Defense League, a close ally of Rustin, to investigate it further. During COFO’s January 10 Executive Committee meeting Moses presented her findings and set out a plan to “duplicate that machinery and contest the regularly-appointed delegates to the convention.”<sup>5</sup>

Most COFO-workers, however, found the goal of the Challenge confusing. As late as SNCC’s June 1964 meeting several doubted its necessity. Charlie Cobb argued that “there would be negligible value in merely being part of the Democratic Party” because of the “danger of Negroes being manipulated.” Ivanhoe Donaldson agreed: “If we are working in a program which is completely controlled by those working against us what is the point of working within the Democratic Party? It is not a radical tool.” But Moses asked them to consider how the Challenge could benefit black Mississippians. In order to help them, COFO needed a better understanding of economic and political structures, and the Challenge “should at least give us an idea of what we do or don’t understand.” He reassured his colleagues that neither SNCC nor the MFDP could be “sucked into the Democratic Party.” The Challenge remained “radical” because it would bring new, locally-based leadership into play. “Note that Jackson Negroes are embarrassed that Mrs. Hamer is representing them,” he said, “she is too much of a representative of the masses.” The Challenge could thus help democratize Mississippi’s black community.<sup>6</sup>

The presence of someone with a guiding vision helped the COFO-workers believe in the Challenge’s feasibility. At best, they argued in January, it could “focus national publicity on Mississippi;” “familiarize the COFO constituency with the workings of the Democratic Party;” and spur connections with the Party’s liberal wing. But as the project progressed through Moses’ and others’ efforts on the national level, they gradually believed that more was possible. Since most COFO-workers had no experience of cultivating national support, Moses constantly traveled in and out of Mississippi to generate as broad a

<sup>4</sup> Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 400; Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 14; SNCC Executive Committee Meeting, April 18-19, 1964, Minutes, Box 6, Folder 2, Ella Baker Papers; Sellers and Terrell, *The River of No Return*, 109; Lewis and D’Orso, *Walking with the Wind*, 247; SNCC Executive Committee Meeting, June 9-11, 1964, minutes, Files #0975-0992, Reel 3, Series III, Staff Meetings, SNCC Papers.

<sup>5</sup> “Minutes of the Meeting of the SNCC Executive Committee,” December 27-31, 1963, Files #0313-0328, Reel 3, Series III, Executive and Central Committees, Executive Committee, SNCC Papers; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Anne Romaine, September 1966/November 14, 1987, Anne Romaine Papers; COFO Staff Executive Committee Meeting, January 10, 1964, meeting, James Forman Papers, Library of Congress. During the meeting Moses argued against doing the same for the Republican Convention, because it was “too far away (San Francisco)” and because “the Republicans have no real interest in Mississippi.”

<sup>6</sup> SNCC Executive Committee Meeting, June 9-11, 1964, minutes, Files #0975-0992, Reel 3, Series III, Staff Meetings, SNCC Papers.

coalition as possible. His activities underline his ability to function within white institutions, the depth of his understanding of American politics, and his hands-on organizing skills.<sup>7</sup>

A May 5 letter to Harry Belafonte showcased what Mary King called Moses' "political shrewdness." After describing the Challenge as an effective means "for united action among the civil rights groups," he proposed to ensure "support from big political people." He targeted Robert F. Kennedy because of rumors that Kennedy wanted to organize against President Johnson. He based this on Kennedy's role in Pierre Salinger's Senate campaign, which "I heard in California was Kennedy's bid for a hand in California Democratic Party politics." White House transcripts reveal that President Johnson indeed feared that Kennedy wanted to get him in "every way he can." Moses obviously did not know this, but if true, he calculated, "it would certainly be in Bobby Kennedy's interest to help the challenge to develop into as big a thing as possible." Moses then cannily asked Belafonte to meet Kennedy and "feel him out for us." He asked his friend, Harvard University's Guido Goldman, to "see Belafonte" to make sure "that the meeting with Kennedy comes off."<sup>8</sup>

Moses enlisted others in his Northern network. With white labor activist Tom Kahn, a close friend of Bayard Rustin, he persuaded a reluctant Rustin to help. He also extracted a commitment from Roy Wilkins—no mean feat considering the latter's hostility toward SNCC. In January he proposed forming a committee, composed of Tom Hayden and others "interested in demonstrations or action at the convention," and having it meet with COFO to "advise us on the possibilities of civil disobedience[,] on strategy, publicity, etc." On July 23 Moses discussed "ground rules" for a "coordinated strategy of negotiation, lobbying, and demonstrations" with Ella Baker, Martin Luther King, James Farmer, Dave Dennis, and Bayard Rustin at Tougaloo. To safeguard his desire for a civil rights-labor alliance, Rustin advised moderation and pressured King to refuse any commitment unless there were clear rules regarding demonstrations. Eventually, Moses said in 2011, they "agreed that if [MFDP] delegates saw fit, they would demonstrate, but there would be no call from SNCC for a mass demonstration." It was the only time he and King met to discuss the Challenge because, Moses explained, "we travelled in very different movement circles."<sup>9</sup>

Meanwhile Moses had asked Casey Hayden to further develop the Challenge. Hayden discussed it with Allard Lowenstein, whom Moses had asked in February "to handle the program to unseat [the] Mississippi Democratic Party." She closely followed discussions on the Democratic Party within the Students for a Democratic Society, debates which, according to Mary King, deeply "influenced her thinking and discussions with Bob." In March she contacted University of Chicago professor Walter Johnson, who recommended obtaining strong "legal advice." Johnson urged her to recruit California and Illinois Democrats, and to seek backing from the United Automobile Workers (UAW). The UAW was not only the most powerful union in the nation, but also wielded considerable influence within the Michigan Democratic party. During his visit to Stanford University Moses indeed met influential California Democrats, who, he wrote, "were enthusiastic and are making plans for seeking [MFDP] delegate support." In May he went to

<sup>7</sup> "Re: Plans for Action at National Democratic Convention," memorandum from Convention Committee to COFO Staff Executive Committee, January 16, 1964, James Forman Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>8</sup> Bob Moses to Harry Belafonte, letter, May 5, 1964, Files #0809-0810, and Casey Hayden (for Moses) to Guido Goldman, letter, May 5, 1964, File #0810, Reel 70, Appendix A: MFDP Papers, SNCC Papers; Lyndon B. Johnson to Walter Reuther, August 24, 1964, and to Walter Jenkins, August 25, 1964, transcript telephone calls, in *Taking Charge*, ed. Beschloss, 489, 523-527, 531-535.

<sup>9</sup> Bob Moses to Joseph Rauh, letter, May 1, 1964, File #0799, Reel 70, Appendix A: MFDP Papers, and Casey Hayden to Norm and Velma Hill et al., letter, April 15, 1964, Files #0242-0243, Reel 41, Series XVI, Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, SNCC Papers; "Re: Plans for Action at National Democratic Convention," memorandum from Convention Committee, January 16, 1964, and "Preliminary Notes on Primary Elections and Democratic Party Convention," memorandum, January 5, 1964, James Forman Papers, Library of Congress; Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 412-413; Robert Parris Moses, email interview by author, August 28, 2011; Robert Parris Moses, interviews by Taylor Branch, August 11, 1983, and February 15, 1991, Taylor Branch Papers.

Detroit to meet Michigan Democrats, and attended a fundraising party organized by white lawyer Dean Robb at Moses' request. He wrote Solidarity House's Bill Dodd for "political and financial support," and asked Roy Reuther to help him obtain a meeting with UAW-President Walter Reuther. In June he reached out to Ralph Helstein, President of the left-leaning United Packinghouse Food and Allied Workers.<sup>10</sup>

The most significant new person Moses enlisted was white UAW lawyer and former Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) chairman Joseph Rauh. Rauh had high political connections, including Hubert Humphrey. Moreover, he belonged to the DNC's Credentials Committee, the body that would decide the Challenge's outcome. Moses had first met Rauh at the March 19-20 National Civil Liberties Clearing House Conference in Washington, D.C. During a panel that Rauh chaired, Moses asked him what he thought their chances were. "[P]retty good," he replied, and offered his services. Rauh was impressed with Moses, he recalled in 1985: "I liked him, he liked me." Two days later they discussed the Challenge again at the UAW convention, which Moses attended with Ella Baker and James Forman. In 1967 Baker claimed that Reuther had been notably cold: after Moses explained the MFDP Challenge, "Walter gets up, acting as if nothing had been said." According to Rauh, Reuther recognized "it immediately as a possible confrontation with [President] Johnson." Rauh obtained ADA support and concocted ways to get seats for civil rights supporters on the Credentials Committee. He, Moses, and Baker discussed plans again in Washington on May 20 and 21 during an ADA convention, bringing labor/CORE activist Norman Hill into the meetings. Rauh then agreed to act as the MFDP's legal counsel.<sup>11</sup>

The presence of Rauh during these preliminary stages proved vital. When Moses came "to D.C. to talk to political people," Stokely Carmichael wrote, "Rauh's name clearly opened doors." Moreover, Aaron Henry acknowledged, "without the technical guidance from Joe Rauh and his associates, we probably would have been completely overwhelmed." According to Moses, Bill Higgs, whom Ella Baker recruited as another legal adviser, "was very important in setting that [MFDP] up" too. With lawyer Ben Smith, Moses and Jack Minnis devised plans to "file suit in a federal district court...if the [MFDP] isn't seated." Rauh, however, rejected this proposal, arguing that their whole case depended on telling the DNC that it "must make that decision in our favor precisely because there is no other tribunal to which we can appeal." His directive role is also evident from Rauh's dismissal of Moses' arrangements for a workshop for FDP-members at Highlander. "[W]e have enough of a scrap ahead," he stated; the "necessary discussions with the delegation could be held in Atlantic City." To facilitate its relationship with Rauh, the MFDP opened an office, under Ella Baker's direction, in Washington.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Casey Hayden to Norm and Velma Hill et al., April 15, 1964, Files #0242-0243, Reel 41, Series XVI, Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, and "Notes on Conversation with Al Lowenstein," report from Casey Hayden, July 15, 1964, File #1346, Reel 69, Appendix A: MFDP Papers, SNCC Papers; Moses to Lowenstein, letter, no date (likely February 1964), William Heath Papers; King, *Freedom Song*, 329; Bob Moses to Joseph Rauh, letter, May 1, 1964, File #0799, Moses to Bill Dodd, Robert Spike, Dean Robb, Larry Landry, Roy Reuther, and Mildred Jeffrey, letters, April 30, 1964, Files #0796-0798, Moses to Jeffrey, letter, May 15, 1964, File #0812, and Casey Hayden to Martha Prescod, letter, May 1964, File #0800, Reel 70, Appendix A: MFDP Papers, SNCC Papers; Bob Moses to Ralph Helstein, letter, June 1964, James Forman Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>11</sup> Ransby, *Ella Baker & The Black Freedom Movement*, 332-333; Moses to Rauh, letter, May 1, 1964, File #0799, Reel 70, Appendix A: MFDP Papers, and Executive Committee Meeting, May 10, 1964, minutes, Files #0993-0997, Reel 3, Series III, Staff Meetings, SNCC Papers; Cagin and Dray, *We Are Not Afraid*, 403-405; Davis, "Sisters and Brothers All," 80-81; Ella Baker and Joseph Rauh, interviews by Anne Romaine, March 25 and June 16, 1967, transcripts, Anne Romaine Papers; Joseph Rauh, interview by Blackside, Inc., October 31, 1985, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries.

<sup>12</sup> Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 403; King, *Freedom Song*, 347-348; Ransby, *Ella Baker & The Black Freedom Movement*, 333; "Preliminary Notes on Primary Elections and Democratic Party Convention," memorandum, January 5, 1964, and "Proposal to Challenge the Seating of the Miss Dem Party," memorandum, no date, James Forman Papers, Library of Congress; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Anne Romaine, September 1966/November 14, 1987, Anne Romaine Papers; Henry and Curry, *Aaron Henry*, 166, 187; SNCC Executive Committee Meeting, April 18-19, 1964, minutes, Box 6, Folder 2, Ella Baker Papers; Jack Minnis to Ben Smith, letter, April 20, 1964, and Rauh to Moses, letter,

The Washington FDP office did much significant work, ranging from raising funds and support to arranging transportation to Atlantic City. Moses was repeatedly consulted<sup>13</sup>. Reginald Robinson, Charles Sherrod, Frank Smith, and two 19-year-old New Yorkers, Walter Tillow and Barbara Jones, assisted Baker in contacting delegates to get their states to pass resolutions supporting the MFDP. Smith spoke at the Democratic state conventions in Connecticut and California, and Tillow in Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. Georgia SNCC's Prathia Hall enlisted the help of the National Council of Churches, and SNCC asked its FOS-offices to arrange speaking engagements and petitions nationwide. Subsequently, historian Vanessa Davis wrote, "the Johnson administration...finally began to take the challenge seriously." Baker herself met with A. Philip Randolph, Adam Clayton Powell, and other national civil rights, labor, and political leaders. At Moses' advice she utilized "NAG and Frank Smith to gain support from Washington contacts and unions."<sup>14</sup>

Baker was nevertheless wary about placing too great an emphasis on recruiting nationally prominent figures. "[W]hile we should try to use the machinery of the Democratic Party and liberal pressure groups," she argued at a May SNCC-meeting, "we should not depend on it." Like Moses, she said in 1967, she had felt that "the leadership for this national effort should come [from] Mississippi. It should not be turned over...to a New York-based committee." But COFO knew it needed outside help. As Ed King put it: "Do we do our own stuff [or] do we turn it over to the people that know how to do it?...It's awful to know that you need someone else to do something that you don't know how."<sup>15</sup>

The Challenge epitomized the tensions between COFO's new national strategy and the old grassroots approach. In 1970 Aaron Henry stated that it was absurd to think that "country bumpkins from Mississippi" could just be "let in" at Atlantic City. "It took Whitney Young, Roy Wilkins[,] Martin Luther King [and] the power of this nation to open that door." Yet he denied that the impetus came from outside. "[L]et nobody ever feel that the [FDP] was an idea imposed upon us—it was us!" Obviously, the efforts of black Mississippians themselves had prompted outside involvement in the first place, and these were the people who were most exposed to white retaliation. Locals *had* to make the key decisions, Moses explained, because "people will not organize that kind of seminal effort around somebody else's agenda. It's got to be internalized."<sup>16</sup>

Before the MFDP could choose its delegates for the DNC, participants first had to be 'freedom registered'<sup>17</sup>. COFO, Moses wrote, aimed to 'freedom register' "200,000-400,000 Negroes" statewide.

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June 30, 1964, Box 1, Folder 15, Benjamin E. Smith Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society; Myles Horton to Moses, letter, July 7, 1964, Box 21, Highlander Research and Education Center Collection.

<sup>13</sup> Although the Washington FDP-office regularly asked Moses' advice, he was often difficult to locate with his many preoccupations for the overall Summer Project. "Last time I was in Mississippi he was completely elusive," Ivanhoe Donaldson complained, "nobody could find him." (Ivanhoe Donaldson to Bette Johnson, letter, April 14, 1964, File #1156, and Judy Richardson to Bette Johnson, letter, May 5, 1964, File #1161, Reel 11, Series VI, Bookkeeping Department, Financial Records, SNCC Papers)

<sup>14</sup> Ransby, *Ella Baker & The Black Freedom Movement*, 333, 335-336; Davis, "Sisters and Brothers All," 91; Betty Garman, "Re: Convention Challenge," memorandum, no date, Files #0169-0170 Reel 69, and SNCC Executive Committee Meeting, May 10, 1964, minutes, Files #0993-0997, Reel 3, Series III, Staff Meetings, SNCC Papers; Memorandum from Jackson FDP staff to summer volunteers, July 20, 1964, Box 1, Folder 14, COFO Panola County Office Records; SNCC Executive Committee Meeting, April 18-19, 1964, minutes, Box 6, Folder 2, Ella Baker Papers; Ella Baker and Walter Tillow, interviews by Anne Romaine, March 25, 1967, and September 4, 1967, transcripts, Anne Romaine Papers.

<sup>15</sup> SNCC Meeting, minutes, May 5, 1964, Box 1, Folder 1, Walter Tillow Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society; Ed King, interviews by William Chafe, March 10 and October 30, 1988, Allard Lowenstein Papers. Baker's fears of the enterprise being led by a "New York Committee" were not far-fetched; Allard Lowenstein, for instance, had made it clear that he wanted to replace the "red" Baker with himself.

<sup>16</sup> Aaron Henry, interview, September 12, 1970, Files #00170-229, Reel 2, Part 3, Lyndon Johnson Papers; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 178; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 20; Davis, "Sisters and Brothers All," 5.

<sup>17</sup> Moses had devised the plan of a 'freedom registration' at the Greenville meeting in November 1963. Because

Those who were ‘freedom registered’ could also vote in COFO’s June 2 primaries. Like the Freedom Vote, these were mock elections held simultaneously with the official Democratic primaries. It ran three local blacks—Fannie Lou Hamer, James Houston, and Rev. John Cameron—for Congress and one, Victoria Gray, for Senate as write-in candidates for the Democratic Party. Moses regarded these mock elections as an integral part of the MFDP: “This campaign will provide us with heads for the [MFDP] delegation, establish us as a force actually interested in working within the Democratic Party [and] spur Freedom Registration through the publicity we get.” COFO-workers served as campaign managers, precinct registrars, and canvassers. Being preoccupied with his Summer preparations, Moses was not closely involved, leaving field workers largely depended on their own skills<sup>18</sup>. Victoria Gray received 4,314 votes statewide, James Houston 1,190 in the Third Congressional District, John Cameron 1,071 in the Fifth District, and Fannie Lou Hamer 389 in the Delta.<sup>19</sup>

COFO organized new freedom registration drives in June. Dona Richards now provided clear guidelines: one registrar was situated in each county and aided by deputy registrars (one in each town), mobile registrars (every staff-member and volunteer), and one coordinator in each project. Forty-two of COFO’s forty-four projects held such drives, which underlined the projection of Freedom Summer as politically-centered. Moses saw the drives as a convenient means of “allowing us again to involve outside forces.” More bodies meant more registration campaigns, Charlie Cobb explained, and thus a greater chance of federal lawsuits. Moreover, Aaron Henry confessed, “We simply did not have enough capable Negroes and sympathetic whites in the state to organize and implement our ideas.” Despite this outside involvement, one volunteer argued in 2008, COFO saw success as “finding local people who would try to get [other] people registered.” In Holly Springs, one COFO-report proudly reads, “the majority of the canvassing is being done by local people already.” In other projects the volunteers did most of the work. “[T]hey have more time,” one Batesville FDP-leader explained in 1965, “I have to work.” But many workers found the work frustrating. “There is tremendous potential power in the Negro community,” one reported, “But it’s all rocking in swings on the front porch saying ‘Yassuh, yassuh!’”<sup>20</sup>

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official registration was impossible “the way things are,” he argued that they could register blacks *unofficially* in a parallel procedure similar to the mock ballots. If they registered 400,000 blacks, he imagined, “for summer [in the] congressional elections, we can have these people vote.” (Howard Zinn, “Notes on Mississippi Staff Meeting, Greenville, Nov. 14-16, 1963,” and partial typed minutes of the meeting, Box 2, Folder 10, Howard Zinn Papers)

<sup>18</sup> Moses sent a memorandum with instructions in January, but otherwise was not closely involved. Leaving the workers dependant on their own skills was not always fruitful, as Mendy Samstein telephoned in March: “[Freedom Registration] is not getting off the ground—[workers] need the mental gymnastics done in Jackson and given to them laid out so they can proceed forth without tripping over their feet. They want directives.” (“Notes from Bob Moses,” memorandum, no date (likely January 1964), James Forman Papers, Library of Congress; Mendy Samstein, WATS telephone call, transcript, March 22, 1964, Box 1, Folder 1, Mary King Papers)

<sup>19</sup> Bob Moses to Accepted Volunteers, memorandum, no date, and “Freedom Candidates,” report, April 12, 1964, William Heath Papers William; “Negroes Run in Miss.,” *The Student Voice* 5, no. 13 (June 2, 1964): 1, 4, and “Miss. Negro Vote Curtailed in Congressional Primary,” *The Student Voice* 5, no. 14 (June 9, 1964): 1, 3, in *The Student Voice*, ed. Carson, 155, 158-159, 161; Bob Moses to Harry Belafonte, letter, May 5, 1964, Files #0809-0810, Reel 70, Appendix A: MFDP Papers, SNCC Papers; “Outline of Plans for 1964 for Maureen Murphy,” report, December 1963, Folder 1, Mendy Samstein Papers; King, *Freedom Song*, 336.

<sup>20</sup> “Re: Freedom Registration,” memorandum, no date, Files #0152-0154, Reel 67, and “Mississippi Summer Project,” memorandum, no date, Files #0034-0036, Reel 64, and Moses to Belafonte, letter, May 5, 1964, Files #0809-0810, Reel 70, Appendix A: MFDP Papers, and Hardy Frye, “Final Report: Holly Springs Registration Drive,” August 19, 1964, Files #1068-1069, Reel 7, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers; Lisa Anderson Todd, interview by author, Washington DC, October 23, 2008; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 177-178; Charlie Cobb, interview by John Rachal, October 21, 1996, transcript, and Terri Shaw, “Freedom Summer Recollections,” no date, Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi Collection, University of Southern Mississippi; Henry and Curry, *Aaron Henry*, 164; Robert Miles, interview by KZSU Radio Station Stanford University, 1965, transcript, KZSU Project South Interview Collection, Microfiche 2479 (E), Library of Congress.



By mid-July Freedom Registration had reached only 21,431—a mere tenth of Moses’ goal. Moreover, while 200 Mississippians had officially founded the MFDP at COFO’s state convention in Jackson on April 26, Moses and Aaron Henry considered the turnout a “disappointment.” They realized that COFO should spend more “time to get the word around in Mississippi” because blacks needed to attend the regular state party elections before they could justify the MFDP ones. But attending meant jeopardizing life and livelihood. Locals in several counties, including Neshoba, refused altogether, a fact that the Regulars later used to discredit the MFDP’s claims that it accurately reflected the will of the state’s population.<sup>21</sup>

To counter this Dona Richards distributed brochures explaining the regular Party’s procedures, and Moses and other workers toured black communities to encourage blacks to attend the regular elections. On July 19 Moses circulated an ‘Emergency Memorandum’ among COFO-workers that gave a project-by-project breakdown of registration numbers and local MFDP-conditions. Revealing that “the various political programs...are in a very bad shape” statewide, he instructed that “everyone who is not working in Freedom Schools or community centers must devote all their time to organizing for the convention challenge.” It was the Summer’s top priority: “The FDP is not a ‘special interest group’ [but] a program on which all of the staff...should be working full time. All staff members and volunteers are FDP organizers and are responsible for the status of the party’s organization.” He outlined several “emergency organizing” ideas, like Freedom Registration Days and Folk-Sings (registration for admission to folk singers’ performances). He proposed a halt to regular voter registration activities, including taking locals to the courthouse “unless they ask to be taken...After August 20<sup>th</sup> or so we will have ample opportunity to try to convince people to register—if we feel that the psychological value of getting a few people ‘to try’ is worthwhile.” The latter condition indicated Moses’ growing militancy and pessimism since 1961; he regarded the MFDP as his final bet to produce lasting social change in Mississippi. Or, as he characterized it at Stanford University: “This will be a real turning point in terms of whether it will be possible to get anything out of the political structure that is meaningful in this country.”<sup>22</sup>

Moses announced Martin Luther King’s help through tape-recorded radio spots, a television appearance with Aaron Henry, Victoria Gray, and Ed King, and a five-day speaking-tour across Mississippi. Although Taylor Branch has depicted this as a reversal of Moses’ dependence on grassroots leadership in favor of “raw celebrity leadership on the traditional model,” it was logical to use King to promote a COFO-project. He was, after all, the head of one of its most notable organizations, and SNCC and CORE-heads John Lewis and James Farmer toured Mississippi for the same reason. Inviting King was actually a joint decision made at a July COFO Executive Meeting; it was not Moses’ initiative. Despite Rustin’s warnings to keep it at arms’ length, King embraced the MFDP. “[N]othing had inspired me so much for some time as my tour of Mississippi,” he later reflected, “I was proud to be with [COFO and the MFDP].”<sup>23</sup>

Yet King’s presence represented something special. “The King had finally come to darkest America to be among the people,” *The Mississippi Free Press* facetiously remarked. Greenwood blacks, one

<sup>21</sup> Henry and Curry, *Aaron Henry*, 166-167; Davis, “*Sisters and Brothers All*,” 83-84, 88; Joseph Rauh, “Brief submitted by the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party for the Consideration of Credentials Subcommittee of the Democratic National Committee, Credentials Committee of the Democratic National Convention, Delegates to the Democratic National Convention,” no date, Box 2, Folder 1, Roberta Yancy Civil Rights Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York (hereafter cited as Rauh, “Brief submitted by MFDP” no date, Box 2, Folder 1, Roberta Yancy Civil Rights Collection).

<sup>22</sup> Bob Moses, “Emergency Memorandum,” July 19, 1964, Files #0062-0068, Reel 40, Series XV, State Project Files, SNCC Papers; Dittmer, *Local People*. Page 272-273; Bob Moses, “Speech,” (West Coast Civil Rights Conference, April 23, 1964), transcript, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, University of Southern Mississippi.

<sup>23</sup> Bob Moses and the FDP Coordinators, “Emergency Memorandum,” July 19, 1964, Files #0062-0068, Reel 40, Series XV, State Project Files, SNCC Papers; Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 408, 412-413; “King, Lewis Spark Freedom Demo Drive,” *The Student Voice* 5, no. 18 (July 29, 1964) 1, 4, in *The Student Voice*, ed. Carson, 175, 178; Davis, “*Sisters and Brothers All*,” 90; Carson, ed. *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 249-250; COFO Executive Meeting, July 10, 1964, minutes, Box 3, Folder 1, Hunter R. Morey Papers.

volunteer wrote, “rushed tearfully to touch him.” Most SNCC-workers observed this kind of reaction with ambivalence. On the one hand they turned such enthusiasm to their advantage. As Stokely Carmichael admitted: “[People] didn’t know what was SNCC. They just said, ‘You one of Dr. King’s men?’ ‘Yes, Ma’am, I am.’” On the other hand they could only frown at the 20-car caravan of reporters and FBI agents, whom President Johnson had ordered, that accompanied King. Having been refused protection themselves, the COFO-workers asked sarcastically why the FBI was there “since they were not, of course, a police force and could not, of course, protect anyone.” The Jackson NAACP was irked with King’s presence too, but it reacted more harshly to Moses. The latter received “luke-cold applause,” one volunteer recorded, when he spoke about “sharecroppers and people who earn fifteen dollars a week.” Resentment of a new movement leadership that was not “filtered through an education process,” Moses noted in 1983, “went pretty deep.” Most NAACP-members shunned the MFDP for months.<sup>24</sup>

In mid-August freedom registration reached 65,000. In most counties, however, only a handful of Mississippi blacks had tried to attend the Regulars’ elections. The attempt was generally futile: despite state law three-quarters of Mississippi’s 1,884 precincts held no conventions. If they did, whites often lied about their time and location, or barred blacks from voting. A handful of blacks ‘won’ election to the county conventions, but none were elected to the Regulars’ state convention.<sup>25</sup>

These few attempts were nonetheless enough to establish exclusion, which allowed the MFDP to proceed with its own precinct, district, and county elections. Only forty of Mississippi’s 82 counties held meetings due to white harassment including (false) arrests, beatings, and burnings of meeting places. Elections meticulously followed State Party rules, but, inspired by SNCC’s ideal of grassroots democracy, discussions lasted until everyone understood the issues to be voted on. The MFDP was an unprecedented experiment in bottom-up leadership in another aspect too. Its composition reflected class conditions in the black community: barely a fifth of its members consisted of the traditional middle-class leadership of ministers, teachers, or businessmen; the rest were sharecroppers, maids, farmers, and other blue-collar workers.<sup>26</sup>

MFDP-meetings, one historian said, represented “a politics unmatched anywhere else in the United States.” Despite participants’ inexperience, one observer reported, “[w]ithin minutes they were completely at ease and had elected a chairman, secretary, [and] delegates...It was tremendously interesting to watch and indicative of the innate political nature of all men”—as Moses’ father had always taught him. “We haven’t found a Negro yet who’s heard of precinct conventions,” Moses stated, but “they are very eager to learn.” One volunteer recounted another “Moses-style anecdote” of success when he and another worker supervised Batesville’s first election. The second evening they deliberately ran late to find the meeting “in full swing without us. We didn’t bother attending the third.” Locals used the meetings to discuss issues like job discrimination or the need for recreational facilities. Such discussions helped define locals’ stance on the regular Party, its differences with their own, and what ‘freedom’ meant in concrete terms.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 161-162; Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 408-414; Belfrage, *Freedom Summer*, 164-167; Carson, *In Struggle*, 164; Jan Handke, letter, July 26, 1964, Jan Handke Papers, University of Southern Mississippi; O’Reilly, “*Racial Matters*,” 170-171; “En Route on United Air Lines,” Report, File #00375, Reel 5, Part 4, Series I, Records of Andrew Young, Records SCLC; Moses interview Dittmer, 1983.

<sup>25</sup> Davis, “*Sisters and Brothers All*,” 83-84, 88; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 178; Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 296-297; Mendy Samstein, interview by Anne Romaine, September 4, 1966, Anne Romaine Papers; Rauh, “Brief submitted by MFDP” no date, Box 2, Folder 1, Roberta Yancy Civil Rights Collection; King, *Freedom Song*, 338-339.

<sup>26</sup> Rauh, “Brief submitted by MFDP” no date, Box 2, Folder 1, Roberta Yancy Civil Rights Collection; “MFDP Precinct Meetings,” report, June 16, 1964, William Heath Papers. Blacks who participated in the white elections also advocated democratization, having discovered that the regular delegates were “predetermined choices and the voters attending...ratify choices made by others.” (Report on MFDP, no date (likely Fall 1964), Folder 1, Mendy Samstein Papers)

<sup>27</sup> Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 281; Davis, “*Sisters and Brothers All*,” 87; Sutherland-Martinez, ed., *Letters from*

**Democratic National Convention**

The Democratic National Convention is a very big meeting in August.

It is a very important meeting because people in the Democratic Party choose the person they want to run for President of the United States.

People in the Democratic Party from all over the country come together to talk.

Mississippi sends a group of people to this national meeting.

This summer we are going to send a Freedom group to the national meeting.

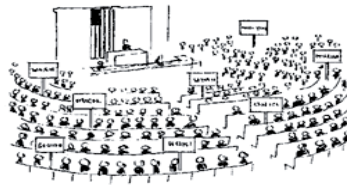
In order to choose the people that we want to go to the National meeting we will have to have four kinds of meetings here in Mississippi first.

We will have: **PRECINCT MEETINGS**

**How many?** As many precinct meetings as we can have—all over the state.

**Who can come?** Everyone who is registered on the Freedom Registration books.

**What will they do?** They will choose people to go to the county meetings.



Democratic National Convention



State Convention



District Conventions



County Conventions



Precinct Meetings

We will have: **COUNTY MEETINGS**

**How many?** There will be 82 county meetings—one in each county in the state.

**Who can come?** The people who were picked at the precinct meeting.

**What will they do?** They will choose people to go to the district and state meetings

We will have: **DISTRICT MEETINGS**

**How many?** There will be five district meetings—one in each district in the state.

**Who can come?** The people who were picked at the county meetings.

**What will they do?** They will choose some people to go to the national meeting.

We will have: **A STATE MEETING**

**How many?** There will be one state meeting.

**Who can come?** The same people who went to the district meetings.

**What will they do?** They will all get together and choose more people to go to the national meeting.

Fig. 1 Pamphlet explaining the MFDP in simplistic terms (Source: <http://www.educationanddemocracy.org>)

The meetings, however, had a mixed record of success. In many rural areas only a handful of people showed up, and frightened locals shunned volunteering for visible positions like chair. Unfazed, Moses emphasized the long-term nature of change. In the short term, he explained, “[t]he important thing may be to [just] draw people into a statewide organization that can support them in some way as we continue to organize those areas.” He advised to “just bring them to the District or State Convention” or simply have all “come as delegates.” Integrating meetings to demonstrate that the MFDP was an open party was even trickier to realize. Canvassing in white areas was not a practical proposition: it was too dangerous. The few whites<sup>28</sup> who joined the MFDP came from moderate areas like Biloxi.<sup>29</sup>

Other participants had difficulty grasping proceedings or the MFDP’s significance. “One man,” an observer wrote, “said flatly that he didn’t understand what the purpose of the meeting was.” Another recalled how at one meeting Martin Luther King “said a lot of fancy things, many of which—I think—were over people’s heads.” In countering such impediments COFO-workers played a significant facilitating role. In Pike County delegates refused election “until Curtis Hayes took over...

Mississippi, 247-248; Bob Moses to Mildred Jeffrey, letter, May 27, 1964, File #0814, Reel 70, Appendix A: MFDP Papers and “Lafayette County Convention of Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party,” minutes, July 31, 1964, File #1072, Reel 8, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers; Wallace Roberts, “All My Days,” unpublished essay 1969/2006, in author’s possession.

<sup>28</sup> No total number of whites who joined the MFDP and its elections is known because the MFDP naturally did “not believe in keeping separate records.” (Sutherland-Martinez, ed., *Letters from Mississippi*, 254)

<sup>29</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 280; Bob Moses and the FDP Coordinators, “Emergency Memorandum,” July 19, 1964, Files #0062-0068, Reel 40, Series XV, State Project Files, SNCC Papers; Rothchild, *Northern Volunteers and the Southern ‘Freedom Summers,’* 84-85; Sutherland-Martinez, ed., *Letters from Mississippi*, 252-254.

and persuaded the group of the importance of the business at hand.” Dave Dennis, James Forman, Stokely Carmichael, and Dona Richards frequently addressed MFDP-meetings and taught locals how to move motions or conduct nominations. In addition, COFO-workers distributed pamphlets explaining the MFDP in simplistic terms and memoranda with instructions outlining structural proceedings, like how to formulate resolutions and keep records, and summarizing the responsibilities of the chair and other officials. COFO held staff workshops too so its workers could “answer almost all questions asked of them about the political structure.”<sup>30</sup>

At the August 6 MFDP state convention, COFO’s local and national efforts converged. Over 800 delegates and 1,700 observers from in and outside Mississippi came to Jackson’s Masonic Temple. The delegates elected an Executive Committee and the delegation to the DNC. Like the regular Party, they chose 44 delegates and 24 alternates. Among them were E.W. Steptoe, Dewey Greene, Charles McLaurin, Jimmy Travis, four whites, several war veterans, and two sons of slaves. Aaron Henry and Fannie Lou Hamer were elected delegation chair and vice chair, and Lawrence Guyot party chairman. They pledged loyalty to the national party and their platform endorsed a variety of Great Society-type programs to ameliorate poverty. It also backed the United Nations and called for an end to “tyranny” in Africa, Hungary, and East-Germany. “Man, this is the stuff democracy is made of,” one observer recorded, “it was not a political convention, it was a demonstration that the people of Mississippi want to be let into America.”<sup>31</sup>

Outside speakers featured prominently. In the keynote Ella Baker urged locals not to elect people who “will represent themselves before they represent you,” and Joseph Rauh outlined the ‘11 and 8’-strategy the MFDP should follow in Atlantic City. First they would present their case to the Credentials Committee. If the latter rejected their case, they could bring it to the convention floor if eleven of the Committee’s 108 members supported them. With the endorsement of eight state delegations they could request a roll-call, during which all present state delegations were forced to vote on the issue. Several had already pledged their support. The audience, Rauh recalled in 1967, was “shouting ‘11 and 8’ before [my] speech was over.”<sup>32</sup>

For Moses the convention was a dream come true. He celebrated the MFDP as an institute in which locals truly “learned how to stand up and speak,” and Atlantic City as a chance to ask “the national Democratic Party whether it would be willing to empower people in their meetings in a similar way.” When he addressed the convention, however, he discouraged over-optimism. Most locals, he said in 1986,

<sup>30</sup> Sutherland-Martinez, ed., *Letters from Mississippi*, 252-254; “The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party,” memorandum, no date, Files #0114-0115, and “What To Do At A FDP Precinct Meeting” and “What To Do At A FDP County Convention,” memoranda, no date, File #0276, and “Democratic National Convention,” memorandum, no date, File #0362, Reel 41, Series XVI, Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, and “Convention Challenge,” memorandum, no date, File #1293, Reel 39, Series XV, State Project Files, and “Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party,” memorandum, no date, File #1029, Reel 19, and pamphlets, no date, File #0698, Reel 21, Series VIII, Research Department, and WATS-report, July 8, 1964, File #0550, Reel 16, Series VII, Communications Department, Internal Communications, SNCC Papers; “Re: Precinct and County Meetings for Freedom Democratic Party,” and “Parliamentary Procedures and Rules of Order for FDP Precinct Meetings,” memoranda, no date, Box 1, Folder 14, COFO Panola County Office Records; Catherine Clarke Civil Rights Collection; Murphree, *The Selling of Civil Rights*, 69; Unita Blackwell, interview by Robert Wright, August 10, 1968, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University.

<sup>31</sup> Davis, “*Sisters and Brothers All*,” 88-89; “Platform and Principles MFDP” and “Loyalty Resolution,” memoranda, no dates, Box 1, Folder 4, Iris Greenberg Freedom Summer Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture; King, *Freedom Song*, 341; Lewis and D’Orso, *Walking with the Wind*, 286; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 181; Dittmer, *Local People*, 282-283; “Re: Second District Convention,” memorandum, no date, Box 1, Folder 14, COFO Panola County Office Records; Marsh, *God’s Long Summer*, 34-35; “Over 800 Meet at MFDP Convention,” *The Student Voice* 5, no. 20 (August 12, 1964): 1, 4, in *The Student Voice*, ed. Carson, 183, 186; “Platform and Principles of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party,” no date, Files #0983-0984, Reel 40, Series XVI, Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, SNCC Papers; Watson, *Freedom Summer*, 237.

<sup>32</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 281-282; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 78; Joseph Rauh, interview by Anne Romaine, June 16, 1967, transcript, Anne Romaine Papers.

believed that “the Democratic party would embrace them,” failing to comprehend “the depth to which... southern politicians were entwined in the Democratic Party.” But he knew from “Harlem politics...that this process of voting and going into politics wasn’t going to pull us out of the problems we were in.” After all, “my experience with the Democratic Party so far didn’t suggest that they were prepared to challenge their powerful southern wing.” He told the delegates that they could expect a hearing, but little else. The President, he explained, feared losing “the whole South.” Focusing on the long term, he argued that getting seated was less important than establishing the party “as a permanent institution that could carry on the fight for MFDP legitimacy, black rights, and fuller black enfranchisement in Mississippi.” He asked James Forman to tour Mississippi to warn participants “that we might not win but that it was absolutely vital for the party to continue its grassroots organizing.”<sup>33</sup>

Many critics treated the MFDP and SNCC as interchangeable. Workers’ reports citing that “certain leaders” tended “to by-pass...democratic procedure” or that adults using “the community centers or the libraries should first be Freedom Registered” spurred charges of manipulation. Moreover, the SNCC-dominated COFO ensured that the NAACP and other middle-class blacks were not central to the MFDP. But Moses considered the charge of SNCC manipulation far-fetched: “The delegation...reflected not so much our control as our ideals.” While seen as “a great diabolical plot against the NAACP,” Ed King agreed, “it really was a rural-urban fight.” Rural blacks automatically united “to defeat ‘big city’ businessmen and professionals.” In many counties the NAACP had ignored them, but never truly developed a base among the middle-class. “Consequently,” another MFDP-leader explained in 1969, “they were not strong enough...to get representatives” for the MFDP elections. Since the NAACP generally shunned the MFDP where it did operate, King added, they logically “did not get elected to office” there either.<sup>34</sup>

Now that the Challenge no longer appeared “crazy,” conservative blacks not only wanted to join the MFDP, but also, according to SNCC, to control it. Such beliefs were encouraged by field reports relating how at one meeting “the comfortable middle-aged ‘We Don’t Want Any Trouble’ Uncle Toms... monopolized the meeting and the votes. Most of the Great New Blood which pulsed through the precinct meeting was slyly siphoned out.” While SNCC-workers’ long-felt animus for the NAACP might have influenced such reports, the MFDP’s earliest participants did demand the exclusion of several middle-class moderates. This in turn frustrated the latter, Ed King explained: “These people had never been told ‘no’ by other Negroes,” so when told they could “work with the Freedom Party” but not be “a delegate...they wouldn’t.”<sup>35</sup>

Simultaneously SNCC-workers consciously exploited this class animus. Already at their June meeting they discussed which locals should be sent to the DNC because, Prathia Hall observed, “[t]he things we seek to achieve can be betrayed by candidates we choose.” Dona Richards acknowledged the thin line between local control and fulltime workers’ desires: “A problem arises because people on the fringes of SNCC are not educated to what we want.” They therefore encouraged those who were: people who SNCC knew and trusted, like Fannie Lou Hamer and E.W. Steptoe. Moses admitted in 1983 that by 1964 SNCC now sought a specific ‘type’ of local leadership. Whereas three years earlier it had not had the

<sup>33</sup> Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 79-81; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 189; Lisa Anderson Todd, conversation with author, Washington DC, November 12, 2009; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Blackside, Inc., May 19, 1986, for *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries; Rothchild, *Northern Volunteers and the Southern ‘Freedom Summers’*, 84; Cagin and Dray, *We Are Not Afraid*, 404-405; Sutherland-Martinez, ed., *Letters from Mississippi*, 251; Moses interview Carson, 1982; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 385.

<sup>34</sup> Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?* 121; “The Jackson Office and Dona” to “All Project Leaders, Field Staff, and Volunteers,” memorandum, no date, Box 1, Folder 14, COFO Panola County Office Records; Dittmer, *Local People*, 282-283; Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 156; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 79; Emma Sanders, interview by Robert Wright, July 8, 1969, transcript, Ralph J. Bunch Collection, Howard University.

<sup>35</sup> Sutherland-Martinez, ed., *Letters from Mississippi*, 249; Ed King, interview by Anne Romaine, August 29, 1966, transcript, Anne Romaine Papers.



luxury to distinguish between locals, it now openly supported the ‘militant’ ones: “There was an effort in the organizing by which to get...as radical a delegation as you could.” Radicalism and class are not inherently related; SNCC supported militant middle-class activists like Annie Devine and Victoria Gray. Yet it was increasingly clear, Moses said, “that the MFDP be an organization where Mississippi’s Black poor... could speak and make decisions.” Ella Baker even credited COFO with seeing “to it that the little people... were not run over” by “middle-class types.” Often this occurred subtly, one worker acknowledged in 1969. SNCC-workers “knew who were active in the different communities and this information just got around. Consequently the ones who [went to MFDP-meetings] were just about selected based on the ones that [SNCC] knew.”<sup>36</sup>

The fragmented delegation nonetheless left optimistically for Atlantic City on August 19. Because of time pressure and the summer’s hectic events, historian Wesley Hogan noted, few had been able “to assess the summer’s developments” or “the increasing complexity of their social relations.” They had no idea, Moses acknowledged, that “the class-thing” would come “to a head” there. ‘Atlantic City’ accordingly “marks a watershed in the movement,” he reflected in 1983, “the end of the consensus on which the movement in Mississippi grew.”<sup>37</sup>

## 9.2. Atlantic City

Moses looked apprehensively to the DNC because the MFDP so closely mirrored his own hopes and doings. His views of the MFDP echoed John Dewey’s belief that education and democracy should be mutually reinforcing. The MFDP’s point was “getting the people...to actually be an integral part of the whole strategy [because] Dewey [has commented] that ‘a lot of work for the common good is neither common nor good.’ It’s not good because it doesn’t actually involve the people that you are trying to help and not common because they don’t really participate in the whole strategy-building process.” Moreover, he believed that the MFDP was “our one chance of attacking the state where they were the weakest. And their weakest point politically was at the Democratic National Convention.” The effectiveness of the movement at large, he stated in April, hinged on the outcome of the Challenge. “[The political structure hasn’t] been able to come up with real solutions. Everything has been patchwork...How long can this go on? How long are Negroes goin’ to maintain nonviolence?...the answer is I don’t know.”<sup>38</sup>

The MFDP-delegation and its supporters arrived in Atlantic City feeling hopeful. Moses’ warnings that they might fail faded into the background. “We had exceedingly high expectations as a result of the response that we got,” one worker explained in 1967. Mississippi farmers successfully lobbied Congressmen and distributed booklets with legal precedents, pamphlets on Mississippi hate crimes, and statements of the regular Democrats criticizing the national party. Civil rights protests on the boardwalk outside the convention—including the showing of placards of James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman, and the remnants of their car—guaranteed non-stop media attention.<sup>39</sup>

The Regulars reinforced their image as die-hard racists who had no interest in democracy and

<sup>36</sup> Emma Sanders, interview by Robert Wright, July 8, 1969, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University; SNCC Executive Committee Meeting, June 9-11, 1964, minutes, Files #0975-0992, Reel 3, Series III, Staff Meetings, SNCC Papers; Dittmer, *Local People*, 282-283; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 79; Moses interview Dittmer, 1983; Francesca A. Polletta, *Strategy and Identity in 1960’s Black Protest: The Activism of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, 1960-1967* (PhD dissertation, Yale University, 1994), 144-145.

<sup>37</sup> Moses interview Dittmer, 1983; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 187-188; Chafe, *Never Stop Running*, 200.

<sup>38</sup> *Freedom On My Mind*, directed by Connie Field and Marilyn Mulford, Clarity Educational Productions, 1994; Davis, “Sisters and Brothers All,” 77; Bob Moses, “Speech,” (West Coast Civil Rights Conference, April 23, 1964), transcript, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, University of Southern Mississippi; Agger, *The Sixties at 40*, 184.

<sup>39</sup> Moses interview Dittmer, 1983; Edward Brown, interview by Harold O. Lewis, June 30, 1967, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University, Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 187-188; Dittmer, *Local People*, 285; Watson, *Freedom Summer*, 241-242.



no loyalty to the national party. Secretary of State Herbert Heber refused to register the MFDP because state law only accepted one party with 'Democratic' in its name. State Attorney General Joe Patterson filed injunctions prohibiting it from further operation under the FDP-name and MFDP-leaders from acting as its representatives<sup>40</sup>. Lawrence Guyot was arrested on a trumped-up charge and prevented from attending the convention. The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission investigated everyone associated with the MFDP and furnished the information to the Regulars. At their state convention the latter had adopted Governor Paul Johnson's plea to "refrain from taking any position regarding support of presidential and vice-presidential candidates" until the DNC rejected the MFDP. Their platform unanimously opposed the national party's; most even openly supported President Johnson's conservative Republican opponent, Barry Goldwater. "We can't afford to turn our country over to the Reds and the red-inspired blacks," MSSC Director Erle Johnston explained. The governors of Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Florida announced to boycott the DNC too if it seated the FDP. With four black delegates, reporter I.F. Stone noted, only Georgia symbolized "a new moderate South."<sup>41</sup>

In addition to its legal arguments, the MFDP believed that it had right on its side. Moses allowed himself to believe that its moral case would be irresistible. If the Challenge got to the floor of the convention, the delegates would not be able to reject it. "I don't see how they possibly can," he stated at a press conference, "if they really understand what's at stake." When he boarded the bus to Atlantic City, one volunteer reported, Moses "was seen to smile." According to biographer Eric Burner, Moses entered the convention on the premise that "practical politics must have moral direction." But he did not get carried away. As historian Wesley Hogan put it: "Moses was not trying to get the regular Democrats to recognize the moral nature of the MFDP's cause; rather, he was asking them to follow their own rules." Most of the religiously-inclined MFDP-members, however, understood politics "as a deeply moral, almost spiritual, affair." They used moral suasion on individual Congressmen and, Institute for Policy Studies-founder Arthur Waskow documented, tried "to get several national religious leaders to say [that the Challenge was] the greatest [moral issue] that the Democratic Party had to face."<sup>42</sup>

The MFDP's presentation to the Credentials Committee on Saturday, August 22, epitomized its moral appeal. Believing that locals could best represent their case, Moses did not speak, but he had

<sup>40</sup> The MFDP challenged the injunctions in the state court that issued it, where it argued that "the FDP was entitled to an immediate hearing, and that the injunction, designed to keep FDP delegates from Atlantic City, was illegal because issued without notice, without any showing of emergency, and without giving defendants a chance to be heard before the Atlantic City convention." They won an immediate hearing, which "limited that part of the injunction that would have prohibited FDP delegates from going to Atlantic City, or caused them to be held in contempt for going." A full hearing was held on October 5, 1964 in Jackson's Chancery Court. To circumvent the injunction to stop delegates from working on party affairs they simply called meetings "workshops," which in practice did "not make any difference—but it is an argument in court." ("Re: Freedom Democratic Party injunction," memorandum, no date, Box 1, Folder 15, COFO Panola County Office Records).

<sup>41</sup> Davis, "*Sisters and Brothers All*," 89-90, 93-94; Annie Devine and Ed King to Herbert Heber, letter, July 20, 1964, Box 1, Folder 4, Iris Greenberg Freedom Summer Collection; "Mississippi State Democratic Party in Convention Assembled July 28, 1964," report, Box 4, Folder 13, Staughton Lynd Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society; "Platform and Principles of the Mississippi State Democratic Party," report, June 30, 1964, and "Mississippi State Democratic Party," report, no date, "Address by Governor Paul B. Johnson to State Democratic Convention," no date, and "Resolution[s]," report, July 28, 1964, Files #1125-1133, Reel 40, Series XVI, Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, SNCC Papers; Marsh, *God's Long Summer*, 34; "FDP Blasts Miss. Demo Convention," *The Student Voice* 5, no. 19 (August 5, 1964): 1, 4, and "Demo Convention Faces Showdown," *The Student Voice* 5, no. 21 (August 19, 1964): 1, 4, in *The Student Voice*, ed. Carson, 179, 182, 187, and 190; Woods, *Black Struggle, Red Scare*, 215-216; I.F. Stone, "Why We Support Johnson and Humphrey," *I.F. Stone's Weekly*, September 7, 1964.

<sup>42</sup> Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 187; Dittmer, *Local People*, 286-287; *Freedom On My Mind*, directed by Connie Field and Marilyn Mulford, Clarity Educational Productions, 1994; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 195; Davis, "*Sisters and Brothers All*," 94; Arthur I. Waskow, "Notes on the Democratic National Convention, Atlantic City, August 1964," confidential report, fall 1964, Box 1, Folder 23, Howard Zinn Papers (hereafter cited as Waskow, confidential report, 1964, Howard Zinn Papers); Watson, *Freedom Summer*, 235.

approved Joseph Rauh's brief beforehand. Aaron Henry opened the presentation—amidst large cabinets filled with locals' depositions on voter discrimination—emphasizing the MFDP's loyalty in the face of persistent and severe persecution. The issue "is not so much who sits where," he concluded, "but the taking of some constructive action to batter down the doors of prejudice within the Mississippi Democratic Party." Ed King described the fear that prevented more whites from joining the MFDP. When one Committee member objected that he did not "want to listen to stories of horror," Rauh admitted they were the core of their case.<sup>43</sup>

Fannie Lou Hamer then testified about her beating in Winona. "[I]s this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave where we have to sleep with our telephones off of the hooks because our lives be threatened daily because we want to live as decent human beings?" she poignantly asked. Moses called listening to Hamer's testimony from the back of the room a "wonderful, charging experience," because "she was able to convey [the MFDP's story] in a way that most of us could not." In fact, Hamer was so heart-wrenching that President Johnson ordered an instant press conference in order to divert the news media. But the T.V. networks replayed her speech during prime-time news. Subsequently 416 telegrams supporting the MFDP (and only one for the Regulars) arrived at the White House.<sup>44</sup>

Other speakers included Roy Wilkins, James Farmer, and Martin Luther King. Farmer reminded the Committee that "making a political decision on principle and on morality is also sound and viable politics," and King spoke elaborately of "the moral health of this party and this nation." "Your choice," Joseph Rauh ended the presentation, "comes down to whether you vote for the power structure of Mississippi that is responsible for the death of those three boys, or whether you vote for the people for whom those three boys gave their life."<sup>45</sup>

The MFDP's moral plea proved highly effective, especially against the Regulars' hollow rebuttal. They denied discrimination of blacks at its conventions and blasted the MFDP as a "group of dissatisfied, power-hungry soreheads" who were supported by "known Communists." "I don't think prior to ten days beforehand many Americans knew what the [MFDP] was," Wisconsin Congressman Robert Kastenmeier argued in 1967, "it took really the dramatization at the convention...to bring it alive." Charles Sherrod agreed. "No human being confronted with the truth of our testimony could remain indifferent," he wrote in its aftermath. "Many tears fell." After Rauh spoke, *The New Republic* observed, "even the reporters rose and applauded." David Lawrence, the Credentials Committee chair, postponed a decision until the next day. "What do you do," one member sighed, "with 53 women on a committee?"<sup>46</sup>

Many white liberals found themselves torn between sympathy for the MFDP and concern for party unity. "It is, of course, entirely irrelevant...whether [Mississippi's] jailers beat prisoners or whether or not its Governor insults widows," one reporter wrote. "[N]o party manager can accept...that any stranger can come to a national convention and claim his right to sit and vote on no higher credentials than his

<sup>43</sup> Davis, *"Sisters and Brothers All,"* 94-97; Joseph Rauh, interview by Anne Romaine, June 16, 1967, Anne Romaine Papers; Dittmer, *Local People*, 288-289; "Partial Proceedings of the Democratic National Convention 1964 Credentials Committee," August 22, 1964, transcript, Box 29, Joseph Rauh Papers, Library of Congress, Washington DC.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.; Davis, *"Sisters and Brothers All,"* 94-97; *Freedom On My Mind*, directed by Connie Field and Marilyn Mulford, Clarity Educational Productions, 1994; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 79-80.

<sup>45</sup> "Partial Proceedings of the Democratic National Convention 1964 Credentials Committee," August 22, 1964, transcript, Box 29, Joseph Rauh Papers, Library of Congress; Martin Luther King, "Statement Before the Credentials Committee," transcript, August 22, 1964, Files #00254-257, Reel 20, Part 1, Series II, Manuscripts and Appointment Calendars, Records SCLC; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 190; Joseph Rauh, "Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Before the Credentials Committee of the Democratic National Convention," in *Freedom Is A Constant Struggle*, ed. Erenrich, 309-312.

<sup>46</sup> "Partial Proceedings of the Democratic National Convention 1964 Credentials Committee," August 22, 1964, transcript, Box 29, Joseph Rauh Papers, Library of Congress, Washington DC; Robert Kastenmeier, interview by Anne Romaine, August 23, 1967, transcript, Anne Romaine Papers; Charles Sherrod, "Mississippi at Atlantic City," in *The Grain of Salt*, October 12, 1964; Murray Kempton, "Conscience of a Convention," *The New Republic*, September 5, 1964.

courage and his suffering.” Most party representatives felt likewise. Before the convention met nine state delegations (California, Michigan, Wisconsin, Colorado, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Oregon, New York, Washington) and the District of Columbia had pledged support for the MFDP. But their reasons varied. The Michigan and New York delegations for instance emphasized that the DNC “should consist only of delegates devoted to the principles and objectives of the Party,” whereas the delegations from Minnesota and Wisconsin stressed the “opportunity to demonstrate [the Democratic Party’s] devotion to justice and equal rights.” The governor of Minnesota nonetheless promised that “the Minnesota delegation will abide by the wishes of the President.”<sup>47</sup>

Overall the Party was more concerned with the Regulars’ disloyalty than with their racism. After all, the DNC’s general counsel Harold Leventhal asked, “what Southern delegation isn’t truly subject to the same charge?” But he also knew that it could not refuse the MFDP altogether: “The contestants—while weak on their own credentials—make a case against the Regular Democrats that will seem strong and just in many quarters.” In July Leventhal had suggested to David Lawrence that the Party offer the FDP “fine spectator seats” as honored guests. When its support grew, he advocated an “intermediate solution” like “splitting the delegation on a lop-sided basis, say 4 to 1.” Yet concern over a southern walk-out dominated his proposals. On August 17 he even suggested solving the loyalty-issue by softening delegates’ pledges to a mere “affirmation that it is the present intention of the delegate to support the ticket of this Convention... unless future developments preclude his doing so as a matter of good conscience.”<sup>48</sup>

For President Lyndon Johnson the MFDP’s moral claim was also problematic because he was bent on not seating it. He even threatened to withdraw his promise to Hubert Humphrey of a place on the presidential ticket unless the latter succeeded in defeating the Challenge. On August 19 Johnson invited Roy Wilkins, James Farmer, Bayard Rustin, and A. Philip Randolph to the White House, where—complete with flip-charts—he lectured them on the dangers of a white backlash. Johnson also recruited Walter Reuther to help him fend off the Challenge. “The only thing that can really screw us good is to seat that group of challengers from Mississippi,” Johnson told him, “there’s not a damn vote that we get by seating these folks.” Reuther and Humphrey pressured Joseph Rauh through multiple phone calls. Meanwhile, acting on orders from the White House, the FBI conducted electronic surveillance of Martin Luther King, Bayard Rustin, Joseph Rauh, SNCC, CORE, the MFDP, and Robert F. Kennedy<sup>49</sup>. At the height of the convention, President Johnson even contemplated renouncing his nomination because he did not “want to have to *fight* to carry Texas.” Although it is doubtful he was serious, the MFDP had evidently penetrated his conscience—to the extent of obsession.<sup>50</sup>

Paradoxically, President Johnson sympathized with the MFDP’s cause. As he privately stated, the Regulars “oughtn’t to be seated. [They] wouldn’t let those nigras vote. And that’s not right.” The MFDP’s effect on politics was thus immediate *and* long-term: it bolstered Johnson’s determination

<sup>47</sup> “Demo Convention Faces Showdown,” *The Student Voice* 5, no. 21 (August 19, 1964): 1, 4, in *The Student Voice*, ed. Carson, 187, 190; “State Democratic Resolutions in Support of the FDP” by Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Massachusetts, Oregon, New York, California, no date, transcripts, Box 1, Folder 15, COFO Panola County Office Records; Dittmer, *Local People*, 290; Davis, “*Sisters and Brothers All*,” 92-93; Kempton, “Conscience of a Convention,” *The New Republic*, September 5, 1964.

<sup>48</sup> Harold Leventhal to David Lawrence, letter, August 5, 1964, and Harold Leventhal to John Bailey and David Lawrence, August 17, 1964, William Heath Papers; Davis, “*Sisters and Brothers All*,” 92-93.

<sup>49</sup> President Johnson still believed, as he told his assistant Walter Jenkins on August 25, that the FDP was “born in the Justice Department,” meaning that Robert Kennedy fueled it to make him vulnerable and gain political influence himself (Beschloss, ed., *Taking Charge*, 531-535).

<sup>50</sup> Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 190-191; Dittmer, *Local People*, 286, 290-293; Lyndon B. Johnson to Hubert Humphrey, May 23 and August 14, 1964, to John Connally, July 23, 1964, to Cartha DeLoach, August 15, 1964, to James Rowe, July 23, 1964, and to Walter Jenkins, August 25, 1964, transcripts telephone calls, in *Taking Charge*, ed. Beschloss, 353-355, 467-469, 485, 515-518, 523-527, 531-535; Moses interview Dittmer, 1983; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 172. When Moses later found out about the wiretaps he thought this was incredible but he figured he “just was naïve about the way in which the FBI works.” (O’Reilly, “*Racial Matters*,” 186-190)

to do something about voting rights, even if he felt that it had to wait until after the November elections because of ‘politics.’ As Johnson told Reuther on August 9, “If they give us four years, I’ll guarantee the Freedom delegation...will be seated four years from now.” On August 25 he repeated this commitment: “We’re hearing ‘em...We passed a law back there in ‘57 and said it was the first time in eighty-five years that everyone was going to have a chance to vote...And we’re going to say it again...in ‘64.”<sup>51</sup>

Ignorant of the President’s machinations against them, the FDP-supporters felt “jubilant” after the hearing. On Sunday the Credentials Committee proposed to seat the MFDP as “honored guests,” but its supporters on the Committee rejected the idea after conferring with the MFDP. Another Committee member suggested offering it two seats, which briefly divided them. Since at least eleven committee members still wanted the roll call, David Lawrence postponed the decision again, until Monday. The MFDP-delegation continued lobbying and tried to get as many delegates as possible to sign a statement supporting the MFDP. A group that included Moses, Dona Richards, Aaron Henry, Ed King, and Fannie Lou Hamer convinced Martin Luther King to join Robert Kastenmeier in asking Credentials Committee-members to sign as well.<sup>52</sup>

The MFDP meanwhile met to discuss potential compromises. It approved one that Oregon congresswoman and Credentials Committee-member Edith Green proposed: the proportional seating of all in both Mississippi delegations who pledged their loyalty to the national party. Discussing compromises beforehand was sound pragmatic politics, indicating that the MFDP was not as naïve as often presumed afterwards. The MFDP in fact expected—and even sought—the seating of both since this had been customary in the past; in 1944 the DNC had even seated two competing Texas delegations in one of which Lyndon Johnson himself had been a delegate. Because Mississippi was “half populated with whites [and] half populated with Negro,” one MFDP-delegate explained, the fairest solution was that “we rightfully were due at least half of the votes.” According to Lowenstein and Rauh, Moses had told them that he would regard two seats as a victory. Moses has always denied this. Green’s proposal was “our bottom line as far as compromise goes,” he stated in 1982.<sup>53</sup>

Unlike Joseph Rauh or James Forman, Moses was not a strategist trying to get as much as possible from the DNC; he considered himself solely a representative of black Mississippians. “Bob,” Ed King said, “became a symbol as a leader of what we were saying. [He didn’t want to but] he knew it was necessary.” During the convention he therefore mediated between the MFDP and national party representatives. King confirmed in 2010 that Moses was constantly “caucusing and meeting with our own delegation to get reports back” to the other state delegations. This was necessary, Joseph Rauh explained in 1967, because although “you couldn’t do better than [utilizing these Mississippi] people as their own advocates,” they “hadn’t been going around the country” like Moses. As Moses put it in 1966, the Challenge “couldn’t have happened just out of the blue. You had to have the contacts.” But he did not believe that such mediation precluded grassroots leadership; MFDP-delegates could be included in

<sup>51</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson to Roy Wilkins, August 15, 1964, to Hubert Humphrey, August 14, 1964, to Walter Reuther, August 9, 1964, to Walter Jenkins and Walter Reuther, August 24 and 25, 1964, transcripts telephone calls, in *Taking Charge*, ed. Beschloss, 510-511, 515-518, 523-527, 531-535.

<sup>52</sup> Waskow, confidential report, 1964, Howard Zinn Papers; Dittmer, *Local People*, 289, 293.

<sup>53</sup> Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 156n.; Mississippi’s ‘Freedom Summer’ Reviewed, conference October 30-November 2, 1979, transcript, Session 7, Folder 6, Mississippi’s ‘Freedom Summer’ Reviewed Collection; Joseph Rauh, interview by Katherine Shannon, August 28, 1967, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University; Chafe, *Never Stop Running*, 198; Watson, *Freedom Summer*, 250; Robert Miles, interview by KZSU Radio Station Stanford University, 1965, transcript, KZSU Project South Interview Collection, Microfiche 2479 (E), Library of Congress; Henry and Curry, *Aaron Henry*, 183-184; Moses interview Carson, 1982. Ed King claimed in 2010 that Moses already asked him “in Mississippi... to put myself in their shoes and figure what might be thrown at us and what we might have to compromise.” (Ed King, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 14, 2010)

such meetings. He considered the DNC “a huge classroom” in which Mississippi blacks “were actually learning the democratic process...It was a great sort of theater for empowerment.” As he reflected in 1982, “[t]hey were there, they had nothing else to do, and they could all sit, while we all talked and hashed out all the matters...And the more people who were educated by that then the wider the fallout when you got back to Mississippi.”<sup>54</sup>

Joseph Rauh and Arthur Waskow later commended Moses for doing “a superior job” in insisting “on open party processes” and “that the constituents in Mississippi be remembered.” In 1966 Mendy Samstein recounted that Moses spent Sunday explaining “what was at stake, what role the President was playing” and “all the different compromises and alternatives” to the MFDP-delegates because most “couldn’t follow all the shifts in strategy.” Moses even declined to leave a MFDP-support rally, where he was scheduled to speak, for a top-level meeting in Martin Luther King’s suite. Moses sent Fannie Lou Hamer, Aaron Henry, Annie Devine, Hartman Turnbow, and Victoria Gray instead; they likewise insisted that other MFDP-delegates could listen from the hall through an open door.<sup>55</sup>

Many national black leaders, however, felt that politics was best left to the professionals. Roy Wilkins allegedly told MFDP-members that he had “been in the business over twenty years [so] why don’t you pack up and go home?” In a secret meeting that evening which deliberately excluded the MFDP, black representatives of Northern delegations told SNCC-workers they believed the MFDP should follow the President’s wishes. When Annie Devine showed up uninvited and chastised them for forgetting “the people who put them there,” the meeting simply closed. Afterwards black Michigan congressman Charles Diggs tricked Moses into giving up a list of the Credentials Committee members who supported the MFDP<sup>56</sup>. Subsequently all received phone calls from presidential aides, who pressured several to withdraw their support or lose benefits like loans or job offers. Presidential aide Walter Jenkins, the FBI documented, also instructed “various Democratic heads [to] talk to various members of the Credentials Committee and have them change their vote.”<sup>57</sup>

The national party’s forceful response to the MFDP reflected its class-bias as much as its fear of losing the election. It preferred dealing with leaders like Roy Wilkins, whom President Johnson considered “the most rational [black] statesman.” Hubert Humphrey and Walter Reuther likewise characterized the MFDP as not being “emotionally stable.” During the convention they centered all negotiations around Martin Luther King, although he barely played a role in the Mississippi movement. “Everything revolved around him,” Moses recalled in 1983. President Johnson found it impossible to understand why the MFDP refused to give up. “If I were a Negro,” he told Roy Wilkins, “I’d just let Mississippi sit up on the platform [and] salute the son of a bitch. Then I’d nominate Johnson for President and...the next four years, I’d see the promised land.” This reasoning entirely missed Moses’

<sup>54</sup> Ed King, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 14, 2010; Joseph Rauh, interview by Katherine Shannon, August 28, 1967, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University; 2010; *Freedom On My Mind*, directed by Connie Field and Marilyn Mulford, Clarity Educational Productions, 1994; Joseph Rauh and Robert Parris Moses, interviews by Anne Romaine, June 16, 1967, and September 1966/November 14, 1987, Anne Romaine Papers; Moses interview Carson, 1982; See also Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 189-190.

<sup>55</sup> Waskow, confidential report, 1964, Howard Zinn Papers; Joseph Rauh and Mendy Samstein, interviews by Anne Romaine, June 16, 1967, and September 4, 1966, Anne Romaine Papers; Moses interview Carson, 1982; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 189-190; Lee, *For Freedom’s Sake*, 90.

<sup>56</sup> Moses initially refused, but Courtland Cox persuaded him because he believed Diggs would give it to Lawrence to show “that we had some clout.” (Courtland Cox, interview by Blackside, Inc., May 14, 1979, for *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries).

<sup>57</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 289-290, 294-296; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 186; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 192-194; Waskow, confidential report, 1964, Howard Zinn Papers; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 388; Cartha DeLoach to Mr. Mohr, memorandum, August 24, 1964, Box 103, “MFDP-File 62-109555,” David Garrow Freedom of Information Act Collection.

point that blacks, particularly the working-class, *could* not nominate Johnson because they were excluded from the political process.<sup>58</sup>

Many white liberals and national black leaders did not know what to do with Moses. They neither understood nor appreciated his mediating role. Bayard Rustin—who had played a double-game of support and opposition since the MFDP’s conception—wanted to exclude him from a high-level meeting with Hubert Humphrey on Tuesday. Moses recalled that throughout the convention he had constantly trailed “around behind [Martin Luther] King” but without results. “There was all this negotiating going on which we were not party to,” he later grumbled, “I spent hours waiting in his hotel room. No communication. No coordination...it was pulling teeth to get information as to what was actually happening.” Yet the Democratic establishment preferred dealing with the articulate Moses to one of the MFDP’s barely literate delegates. “Moses,” James Forman noted, was “singled out by the powers at Atlantic City as the person who could make the [MFDP] accept any compromise.” Hubert Humphrey even told Moses that he believed that “anything you tell those people they’re bound to do...I know you’re the boss of that delegation.” Moses interpreted this as a clash between Old and New Left values. “The traditional Left,” he told *The Village Voice*, “keeps talking about coalitions and leaders, but always from the top; to them Mississippi is a chess board...That’s part of why I keep trying not to get alienated from these [local] people by becoming one of those official leaders.”<sup>59</sup>

Meetings on Monday and Tuesday spurred Joseph Rauh’s conclusion that the establishment’s “real resentment [was] not against the exclusion of Paul Johnson’s crowd” but “against the inclusion of our crowd.” On Monday Hubert Humphrey conferred with several Credentials Committee members, including Rauh and Edith Green, along with Martin Luther King, Moses, Henry, Hamer, and Ed King. According to Arthur Waskow it “was a most upsetting occasion. Moses came down from it looking like death itself.” Moses had insisted that the MFDP should be seated because “only Negroes can speak for Negroes in Mississippi.” But Humphrey blatantly dismissed the concept of bottom-up leadership: “That meant only Russians could speak for Russians, French for Frenchmen.” In tears he explained his vice-presidency was at risk. Fannie Lou Hamer, crying as well, shamed him by asking if his “position [was] more important...than four hundred thousand black people’s lives?” It was a revelation, Moses later told *The Village Voice*, to learn that the MFDP-delegates “were the only people at that whole convention who were free, who made democratic decisions. The President told all the others what to do.” Hamer left the room appalled, and was excluded from further meetings. During the Tuesday meeting—held in Humphrey’s suite with Moses, Rustin, Henry, Ed King, Martin Luther King, Andrew Young, and Walter Reuther—Humphrey admitted that President Johnson had said he did not want “that illiterate woman” to have any meaningful platform. Ed King claimed in 1966 that Moses then called Humphrey a racist. In 1983 Moses said he did not remember the incident, but agreed with the interpretation. He termed the overall “tone of the meeting insulting.” He especially remembered Walter Reuther, whom the President had flown in from Detroit, “telling us that even when we got the vote, we elected irresponsible people.” “Being a person from Harlem, as a constituent,” he said, “that really upset me.”<sup>60</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson to Roy Wilkins, August 15, 1964, to Hubert Humphrey, August 14, 1964, Walter Reuther, August 9, 1964, to Walter Jenkins and Walter Reuther, August 24 and 25, 1964, transcript telephone calls, in *Taking Charge*, ed. Beschloss, 510-511, 515-518, 523-527, 531-535; Handwritten notes Taylor Branch, January 16, 1991, and Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 11, 1983, Taylor Branch Papers.

<sup>59</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 293, 297; Handwritten notes Taylor Branch, January 16, 1991, and Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 11, 1983, Taylor Branch Papers; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Anne Romaine, September 1966/November 14, 1987, Anne Romaine Papers; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 388; Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 158; Jack Newfield, “Moses in Mississippi: The Invisible Man Learns his Name,” *The Village Voice*, December 3, 1964.

<sup>60</sup> Newfield, “Moses in Mississippi,” *The Village Voice*, December 3, 1964; Joseph Rauh and Ed King, interviews by Anne Romaine, June 16, 1967, and September 5, 1966, Anne Romaine Papers; Waskow, confidential report, 1964, Howard Zinn Papers; Dittmer, *Local People*, 293-298; Lee, *For Freedom’s Sake*, 93-96; Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 465-466, 468-471;



This was not what upset Moses most. After the Monday meeting Edith Green announced that they still had enough support on the Credentials Committee—albeit barely—to get a minority report for a roll call vote. David Lawrence then postponed a decision, yet again, until Tuesday. This gave him, Hubert Humphrey, Walter Reuther, and Walter Mondale sufficient time to concoct a new plan: a compromise that they pressured the MFDP-delegates in Humphrey’s suite to accept right there and then, without referring back to their colleagues. Walter Reuther threatened to fire Rauh and withhold funding from SCLC if they did not agree. According to John Dittmer, Aaron Henry and Ed King were open to the offer, but “Moses was not and spoke instead of the wretched conditions in Mississippi and the failure of the federal government to do its job.” Andrew Young and Bayard Rustin criticized SNCC for not understanding the need to get President Johnson reelected. Tensions in the room were palpable. When Humphrey impressed that “the peace of the world depends on you and what you do now,” Moses quietly retorted, “[W]e didn’t come here to represent the people of the world. We are here to represent the voteless people of Mississippi.”<sup>61</sup>

The back-and-forth stopped when a senator’s aide came in, shouting “It’s over!” They rushed to an adjacent room<sup>62</sup> to watch a bulletin announcing that the Credentials Committee, whose meeting was deliberately scheduled simultaneously, had unanimously accepted the compromise while the people in Humphrey’s suite still thought it was a negotiating matter. “You tricked us!” Moses shouted at Humphrey and left the room, slamming the door in his face. Moses later said his reaction—atypical of his calm character—“probably caught [Humphrey] by surprise too.” He was just “furious,” although “the pretense at negotiation was not wholly unexpected.” He was also livid with Joseph Rauh because the ‘unanimous’ ruling implied his consent. Rauh had actually voted ‘no.’ Still, he considered Henry’s endorsement as sufficient reason to embrace the compromise, believing it to be “a great victory for civil rights.”<sup>63</sup>

The compromise proposed to seat Aaron Henry and Ed King as “at-large delegates,” and the rest of the MFDP as ‘honored guests.’ All Regulars who signed a loyalty oath would also be seated. In addition, the compromise promised to end voter discrimination in the elections of future state delegations. The Credentials Committee ruled that “corrective action must begin,” but that seating the MFDP was to “change the rules in the middle of the game.” Seating the Regulars “takes care of the legal problem,” Illinois Democrat Jacob Avery satisfactorily proclaimed, “and to seat the two [MFDP-delegates] takes care of the emotional, I could even say, moral problem.” Yet the MFDP’s point, Moses countered, was to “bring morality into politics”—not vice versa. “Had we been more politically sophisticated,” Henry later said, “we could have seen that, on the national level, the party comes before issues, no matter how important they might be.”<sup>64</sup>

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Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 158; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 178; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 11, 1983, Taylor Branch Papers; Ed King, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 14, 2010.

<sup>61</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 296-298; Lee, *For Freedom’s Sake*, 93-96; Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 465-466, 468-471; Henry and Curry, *Aaron Henry*, 189; Mississippi’s ‘Freedom Summer’ Reviewed, conference October 30-November 2, 1979, transcript, Session 7, Folder 6, Mississippi’s ‘Freedom Summer’ Reviewed Collection; Ed King, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 14, 2010.

<sup>62</sup> There is some discussion in the historic record about how the news of the Credentials Committee’s decision was broken to the people in Humphrey’s suite. Some accounts mention that a TV was rolled in. Moses does not recall a TV at all, but rather a group of reporters outside Humphrey’s room telling them of the decision. Some accounts also mention that the news bulletin did not announce the Committee’s acceptance, but the MFDP’s, and that Moses shouted “You cheated!” to Hubert Humphrey instead of “You tricked us!”

<sup>63</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 296-298; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 81-82; Joseph Rauh, interview by Blackside, Inc., October 31, 1985, for *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries; Mendy Samstein and Joseph Rauh, interviews by Anne Romaine, September 4, 1966, and June 16, 1967, Anne Romaine Papers.

<sup>64</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 296; Davis, “*Sisters and Brothers All*,” 100, 103; Kempton, “Conscience of a Convention,” *The New Republic*, September 5, 1964; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 293; Henry and Curry, *Aaron Henry*, 187.

The MFDP considered the compromise appalling. It was not even a compromise, one volunteer remarked, but rather “a decision made and told to the delegation.” To the MFDP this equaled the “kind of dictation” blacks were “learning to stand up against.” Furthermore, Henry explained, two seats with the Democratic Party deciding who occupied them—two urban, middle-class men—was “token recognition” and “typical white man picking Black folks’ leaders.” Moses called it “absurd” that “they would even think about wanting to choose the people to represent us.” “What is the compromise?” he snapped at an NBC-reporter that night, “We are here for the people and the people want to represent themselves. They don’t want symbolic token votes. They want to vote themselves.”<sup>65</sup>

The compromise, Henry noted, was “paternalistic” in other ways too. First, the promise of future reform was hollow because it prohibited discrimination against ‘voters,’ and Mississippi blacks still had little chance of becoming registered. Moses told *Pacific Scene* that when he asked Humphrey how many voters he could “guarantee us in Mississippi in the next four years,” he simply replied: “We can’t guarantee you any because the Democratic Party doesn’t run the administration.” Second, the two seats were *at large*, which meant that the MFDP would not represent Mississippi, but blacks nationwide. They were two extra seats created for this purpose, so the Party cunningly would not have to take them *away* from anyone. The compromise, its concocters admitted, treated the Challenge solely as “a national, rather than a parochial problem.” The MFDP countered that it was “unreasonable to ask the Mississippi delegation to bear the burden of the entire country,” especially because it was “the nature of all delegations” to represent their state only. Third, the compromise “offered the FDP nothing in the way of permanent recognition, patronage, official status or a guarantee of participation in the 1968 convention.” Above all, Victoria Gray added, accepting meant “betraying the very many people back there in Mississippi [who had] laid their lives on the line.”<sup>66</sup>

The mood at the Union Temple Baptist Church, where the MFDP was caucusing that afternoon, was bitter. The MFDP, one volunteer observed, had learned that “naked coercion [and] sneaky backroom deals” were “also ‘the stuff democracy is made of.’” Joseph Rauh, Edith Green, six other Credentials Committee members, Martin Luther King, Ed King, and Aaron Henry had followed Moses to the church. What ensued, Arthur Waskow reported, was a “heated, terribly strained” meeting, first among themselves and then with the entire MFDP-delegation. The Committee members voiced resentment at the charge of betrayal, but Rauh reiterated that fighting on was useless because their support had now dropped below eleven. Martin Luther King was not even allowed to address the delegation, which by a vote of hands rejected the compromise and repeated it would not accept anything less than Green’s proposal.<sup>67</sup>

What role Moses played in this is unclear, although his resentment was apparent to all. Henry later blamed him for “forcing us into a hasty decision” because he had opposed pleas to postpone a final decision “until calmer heads might prevail.” He accused him of manipulation because “Moses knew that

<sup>65</sup> Lisa Anderson Todd, conversation with author, Washington DC, November 12, 2009; “The Convention Challenge,” report, no date (likely late August or September 1964), Files #0273-0274, Reel 41, Series XVI, Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, SNCC Papers. Rustin’s promise (although he had no authority to implement it) that “if you want Mrs. Hamer you can have her” did not change the MFDP’s opposition to the compromise. “The overriding MFDP sentiment,” Moses explained in 1983, “was that the representation was symbolic anyway.” (Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 11, 1983, Taylor Branch Papers; Dittmer, *Local People*, 298-299)

<sup>66</sup> “The Convention Challenge,” report, no date (likely late August or September 1964), Files #0273-0274, Reel 41, Series XVI, Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, SNCC Papers; Henry and Curry, *Aaron Henry*, 190; Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 159; Crosby, *A Little Taste of Freedom*, 115-116; “Moses in Mississippi Raises Some Universal Questions,” *Pacific Scene*, February 3, 1965; Davis, “Sisters and Brothers All,” 100; Victoria Gray Adams, interview by Blackside, Inc., November 9, 1985, for *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries.

<sup>67</sup> Watson, *Freedom Summer*, 256-257; Waskow, confidential report, 1964, Howard Zinn Papers; Dittmer, *Local People*, 298; Lee, *For Freedom’s Sake*, 96.

the delegation would reject the proposal if an immediate vote was taken.” In 1966 Rauh likewise chastised the “hysteria out there that Moses had built against the thing.” “Bob couldn’t recapture himself and he fought against it 100 percent,” he grumbled, “you couldn’t reason with him...this had struck him like a bolt of lightning.” One SNCC-volunteer recorded that Moses “raised his voice and interrupted their speeches, declaring that there was no time to waste on discussing the compromise: they had all year to do that, and now must get [back] the needed signatures for the minority report.” According to Ed King, however, what Moses might have said “was only what...most of the people thought already.”<sup>68</sup>

Several COFO-staff and Credentials Committee members huddled to discuss their next move. Rauh wanted to talk privately with Martin Luther King, but, he claimed, James Forman and Moses would not leave them because they feared another backroom deal. Moses repeated his plea to find additional Credentials Committee members and convince them to review their decision. They had two more hours before the DNC formally approved the compromise, and just hours earlier they had had the support of more than eleven. “If it had been [an] uncontrolled convention,” Mendy Samstein asserted two years later, “we would have swept it.” But the ‘Credentials minority’ announced that it had given up.<sup>69</sup>

That evening, using floor passes from supporters in the Oregon, Michigan, and Colorado delegations, twenty-one MFDP-members held a sit-in in the near-empty Mississippi section under Moses’ guidance. All but four Regulars had refused the loyalty pledge, returned home, and officially endorsed Barry Goldwater. Governor Paul Johnson justified this decision by stating that the DNC’s openness to the MFDP equaled “the hatred and cruelty of a modern 20<sup>th</sup> century Reconstruction...Mississippi’s debt to the national Democratic Party is now paid in full.” Because of the unit-rule, these four could still cast votes on behalf of all the Regulars. This essentially meant the Regulars had won: even in their absence they kept their seats *and* votes. The purpose of the sit-in, Ed King explained, was to demonstrate “that these were seats that belonged to the people of Mississippi, the black [and] white.” When the chair read out the compromise to all the state delegations, it passed within thirty seconds.<sup>70</sup>

Arthur Waskow recorded that it was “Moses essentially” who pushed the sit-in “to cope with the extreme depression and bitterness” within the MFDP. In 1979 Courtland Cox said the idea evolved when he half-jokingly suggested to Moses and Dona Richards to “take the seats” if the Regulars refused the oath. Moses’ resort to direct action indicated the depth of his anger, but he still believed in consensus. Due to their pre-summer arguments about whether to have civil disobedience at the convention, he had asked Martin Luther King “if it was okay to have nonviolent protest on the floor. And he said yes.” The next day he got King to admit that the “sit-in was probably a creative response to the tension and bitterness that had erupted.” But he was not seeking King’s approval; he merely “wanted to make sure that I had him on record saying that he had approved of this form of response.”<sup>71</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Henry and Curry, *Aaron Henry*, 193; Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long? African-American Women in the Struggle of Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 156; Mendy Samstein, Ed King, and Joseph Rauh, interviews by Anne Romaine, September 4, 1966, September 5, 1966, and June 16, 1966, transcripts, Anne Romaine Papers; Joseph Rauh, interview by Blackside, Inc., October 31, 1985, for *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries; Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 470; Lee, *For Freedom’s Sake*, 96-97; Belfrage, *Freedoms Summer*, 242.

<sup>69</sup> Mendy Samstein, Ed King, and Joseph Rauh, interviews by Anne Romaine, September 4, 1966, September 5, 1966, and June 16, 1966, transcripts, Anne Romaine Papers; Joseph Rauh, interview by Blackside, Inc., October 31, 1985, for *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries; Waskow, confidential report, 1964, Howard Zinn Papers.

<sup>70</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 299; Davis, “*Sisters and Brothers All*,” 109-110; Henry and Curry, *Aaron Henry*, 194-196; Ed King, interview by Anne Romaine, September 5, 1966, Anne Romaine Papers.

<sup>71</sup> Waskow, confidential report, 1964, Howard Zinn Papers; Courtland Cox, interview by Blackside, Inc., May 14, 1979, for *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries; Handwritten notes Taylor Branch, January 16, 1991, and Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 11, 1983, Taylor Branch Papers; Robert Parris Moses, interview by William Chafe, October 7,

Other national leaders were less sympathetic. The National Council of Churches condemned the sit-in and Democratic Party officials dismissed it as additional proof that the MFDP “was incapable of reasonable activity.” *The New York Times* reported that one previously sympathetic white now complained “how unwise and damaging he thought the demonstration was.” The sit-in nonetheless generated widespread press coverage and its participants, Waskow observed, “felt victorious.”<sup>72</sup>

Hoping to prevent more civil disobedience, the national leadership pressed the MFDP to review their rejection. On Wednesday Aaron Henry convened the delegates in the church to listen to Joseph Rauh, James Farmer, Allard Lowenstein, Bayard Rustin, Martin Luther King, and several NCC-members. Henry now supported the compromise as a means to “get a commitment for more civil rights legislation.” He also felt that “the people that helped us open the door had a right to at least have something to say about what the decision ought to be.” Insisting that the decision belonged solely to the MFDP, however, Moses rushed to join the caucus.<sup>73</sup>

Throughout the convention Moses had responded to requests for advice by telling Fannie Lou Hamer and others, “do what you think is right.” But now he deliberated whether to use his influence with the delegation as a counterweight to the national heavyweights. On Tuesday he had told Martin Luther King that “if he spoke that I would also have to speak,” because it “would be putting too much pressure on the delegation for him to speak like that.” This would still be consistent with his belief in grassroots leadership, he believed, because delegates could only make an informed decision if they could “listen through *all* the arguments.” And if her husband would not, Dona Richards figured, then James Forman would have no such qualms. Anxiously she called Forman: “They want to try to force the people from Mississippi to change their minds...Bob’s the only one that’s against it. He’s not sure he’s going to speak [so we] want you to come down and speak for SNCC.”<sup>74</sup>

One by one the national leaders spoke in favor of accepting the compromise, insisting that the delegation needed to understand, in Rustin’s words, the difference between “protest and politics.” Martin Luther King, who admitted that he would vote against it if he had been a native Mississippian, asserted that pragmatism should prevail “even in the most idealistic of situations.” When Moses questioned him he acknowledged that he “would not have rejected the proposal in the first place.” The meeting accordingly underscored the difficulties of maintaining consensus in a broad coalition: strains were created because COFO-workers’ field experiences had added a radical bent to their perspective that was difficult for their outside allies to comprehend.<sup>75</sup>

Only Rita Schwerner and James Forman spoke against the compromise; Moses merely implied his opposition. This led Arthur Waskow to laud Moses as “an excellent politician who can manipulate when necessary but prefers to do so on behalf of ending the process of manipulation as soon as possible, and who (it seems to me) himself avoids manipulation on many occasions when he could easily use it.”

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1989, Allard Lowenstein Papers.

<sup>72</sup> Davis, “*Sisters and Brothers All*,” 114; Anthony Lewis, “The Negro and Politics,” *New York Times*, August 27, 1964. The sit-in even forced those in the middle to take a position; one sergeant-of-arms in charge of vacating the Mississippi section felt obligated to tell the sit-inners that he “favored an ‘open’ society” and was merely “trying to enforce the will of the convention.” (Walter Adams to Walter Jenkins, letter, September 1, 1964, William Heath Papers)

<sup>73</sup> Henry and Curry, *Aaron Henry*, 196-197; Aaron Henry, interview, September 12, 1970, Files #00170-229, Reel 2, Part 3, Oral Histories, Papers Lyndon Johnson.

<sup>74</sup> Unita Blackwell, interview by Robert Wright, August 10, 1968, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University; Lee, *For Freedom’s Sake*, 94, 97-99; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 390-393; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 11, 1983, Taylor Branch Papers; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Blackside, Inc., May 19, 1986, for *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries.

<sup>75</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 299-302; Waskow, confidential report, 1964, Howard Zinn Papers; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 11, 1983, Taylor Branch Papers; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 186-187.

According to Annie Devine, Moses just “sat back and watched.” When he finally spoke he only announced his resolution “to remain out of the controversy” because the decision was the delegation’s to make. He nonetheless advised them to base it on “Mississippi and its own hopes and desires,” not on wanting “to please the liberal civil rights establishment.” Despite his demure tenor, one observant noted, “[i]t was really like listening to the Lord...Moses could have been Socrates or Aristotle...as Moses was finishing, King and everybody knew the jig was up.”<sup>76</sup>

The delegation discussed the compromise in private and once again voted for rejection. The MFDP repeated its sit-in that night. When President Johnson addressed the convention on Thursday, sergeants-at-arms barred entrance to the rows of the Mississippi section. The delegation, again guided by Moses, then formed a circle and stood silently, carrying pictures of President Kennedy with his famed “Ask Not What Your Country Can Do For You”-quotation. Meanwhile Johnson nominated Hubert Humphrey for the vice presidency and proclaimed that the Mississippi problem had found “a fair answer to honest differences among honorable men.”<sup>77</sup>

### 9.3. A Moment Lost

The MFDP’s rejection of the compromise, although almost unanimous, strained the MFDP’s unity. Those who favored acceptance, Moses recalled, “were the NAACP [and the] more established people from the large cities,” but the “delegates from the rural areas voted against it.” According to movement folklore, the first, by far the minority, tried to overrule the latter. It was “the worse mess I’ve ever seen,” Unita Blackwell asserted in 1968, “All the big fish...moved in on us.” “The attitude of the administration and its supporters,” historian Vanessa Davis therefore argued, “helped lead to the rejection” because Mississippi blacks had not “risked their lives to come to Atlantic City to be treated as ignorant, submissive children.” “We didn’t come all this way for no two seats,” Fannie Lou Hamer impressed, “when all of us is tired!” After they finished “hoopin’ and hollerin’,” one middle-class black recalled, “I changed my mind... [they] just shamed me right there.”<sup>78</sup>

Yet not all MFDP-delegates were open to the national leaders’ viewpoints merely because the presence of these ‘big shots’ overwhelmed them. Nor did middle-class blacks automatically dismiss working-class delegates. Several genuinely believed that accepting the compromise made political sense. Even Charles McLaurin, who had worked for SNCC since 1962, acknowledged that only after Moses spoke had he realized that “the movement was bigger than just getting some recognition.”<sup>79</sup>

The ‘stab-in-the-back’-thesis has nonetheless come to dominate historical analyses of Atlantic City. The accuracy of that interpretation, however, is less relevant than how COFO-workers *experienced*

<sup>76</sup> Waskow, confidential report, 1964, Howard Zinn Papers; Annie Devine, interview by Anne Romaine, November 22, 1966, Anne Romaine Papers; Sellers and Terrell, *The River of No Return*, 109; Lee, *For Freedom’s Sake*, 97-99; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 186-187.

<sup>77</sup> Beschloss, ed., *Taking Charge*, 541. By then several middle-class leaders like Roy Wilkins and Aaron Henry had left Atlantic City. Roy Wilkins had left because he disagreed with the MFDP’s position regarding the ‘compromise’ and because he disliked being used by President Johnson. Moses later commended him for his position: “Johnson was bringing a lot of people down to the convention with the explicit purpose of trying to persuade the MFDP to change its mind. One such person I remember was honest enough to say so openly was Roy Wilkins. I remember we were in a meeting together where he said ‘well, I’m not going to be Johnson’s running boy,’ and he left. And as far as I know he was the only national leader who came down and took a look around and decided that what was going on was really not something that he needed to be involved in.” (Robert Parris Moses, interview by Blackside, Inc., May 19, 1986, for *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries)

<sup>78</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 300-302; Moses interview Dittmer, 1983; Unita Blackwell, interview by Robert Wright, August 10, 1968, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University; Ed King, interview by Anne Romaine, August 29, 1966, Anne Romaine Papers; Davis, *Sisters and Brothers All*, 4, 106-107, 235-236.

<sup>79</sup> Moye, *Let The People Decide*, 140-141.

events. The national leaders' attitude offended Moses because he treated the FDP as a means "to teach the lowest sharecropper that he knows better than the biggest leader what is required to make a decent life for himself." As Unita Blackwell put it, "we was ignorant [but] not stupid." The "nation's intellectual-cultural elite," historian Wesley Hogan contends, considered such "experientially tested view[s] from within" as "naïve or even offensive." They "looked at the political process like it was school integration," Moses lamented in 1982. "You get a couple of well-dressed Negroes, shine their shoes, and bring them in and you've started your process."<sup>80</sup>

The Challenge, Moses believed, demonstrated the power structure's unwillingness to accept "the underclass of this country"—black as well as white—as more than "recipients of largesse." This became poignantly clear in Mississippi, where the federal administration encouraged the formation of a third Democratic Party, the Loyal Democrats of Mississippi. It consisted of moderate blacks and whites, and was seated at the 1968 Democratic National Convention as the official Mississippi delegation. In a similar fashion, the Johnson administration ended up downgrading the Economic Opportunity Act's requirement of "maximum feasible participation" of the poor in Johnson's post-re-election Great Society programs. Movement initiatives like the Child Development Group of Mississippi (CDGM) were incorporated into the new federally-funded Head Start programs, and staffed with moderate activists. This "mad desire for control," Moses complained, "[smothered] the movement that created the way."<sup>81</sup>

"In the short [run]," Ivanhoe Donaldson concluded in the 1980s, the Challenge "was a bitter defeat." It revealed the class-bias among national civil rights leaders and white liberals, leading to the alienation of large segments of the movement from both. "What happened," one SNCC-worker explained in 1967, "challenged the whole concept of the use of coalition politics for social change." As Moses put it, "Atlantic City was a watershed in the movement because up until then the idea had been that you were working more or less with the support of the Democratic Party [but now you] turned around and your support was puddle-deep."<sup>82</sup>

"A moment was lost," Moses asserted in 1991, because the Party "lost a whole generation of its activists." First, Atlantic City helped propel SNCC toward Black Power. "The seating of the [MFDP] could have gone a long way toward restoring [blacks'] faith in the intentions of our government," Charles Sherrod wrote in its aftermath. Instead, John Lewis noted, the lesson many learned was that anyone "who trusted the white man at this point was a fool, a Tom." The 'betrayal' of black leaders accelerated this development. Stokely Carmichael, one of Black Power's chief proponents, had been a Bayard Rustin protégé during his time at Howard University. "One of the main things that happened to Stokely at Atlantic City," Moses recalled in 1991, "is he disengages himself mentally and spiritually from Bayard...that's what feeds Black Power in Stokely." The embrace of Black Power, in turn, stifled SNCC's effectiveness in subsequent years as the shift alienated SNCC from poor blacks like Fannie Lou Hamer. Second, Atlantic City left many of the white volunteers disillusioned too. Atlantic City, Lewis believes, turned them "into radicals

<sup>80</sup> Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 82-83; Unita Blackwell, interviews by Michael Garvey, April 21 and May 12, 1977, transcript, Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi Collection, University of Southern Mississippi; Moses interview Carson, 1982; *Freedom On My Mind*, directed by Connie Field and Marilyn Mulford, Clarity Educational Productions, 1994; SNCC Meeting Waveland, November 6-12, 1964, minutes, Files #0935-0957, Reel 11, Series V, SNCC Conferences, SNCC Papers; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 236.

<sup>81</sup> *Freedom On My Mind*, directed by Connie Field and Marilyn Mulford, Clarity Educational Productions, 1994; Newfield, "Moses in Mississippi," *The Village Voice*, December 3, 1964; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 198; Dittmer, *Local People*, 363, 368-382; Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 42; Moses interview Dittmer, 1983.

<sup>82</sup> Edward Brown, interview by Harold O. Lewis, June 30, 1967, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University; Ivanhoe Donaldson and Robert Parris Moses, interviews by William Chafe, no date, and October 7, 1989, transcripts, Allard Lowenstein Papers; Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 162; Moses interview Carson, 1982; Handwritten notes Taylor Branch, January 16, 1991 (Taylor Branch Papers).



and revolutionaries. It fuelled the very forces of protest and discontent that would eventually drive Lyndon Johnson out of office.”<sup>83</sup>

Furthermore, Moses bemoaned in 1983, “no-one saw the connection between [Atlantic City] and the urban situation.” He had started the Challenge to help Northern blacks as much as Southern ones, but the Democratic Party “missed the chance.” Had it included working-class blacks, he argued, it could have used that as a means to turn the urban rioting trend that started that summer in Harlem and that came to dominate the late 1960s. Northern blacks had the right to vote, but since the working-class was not organized enough their representatives remained the few powerless, middle-of-the-center black politicians that worked against the MFDP in Atlantic City. “[T]he Diggs case is no mere accident,” Waskow already observed. Riots were therefore inevitable, Moses believed, because it “was clear [that] there was nothing in the Democratic Party to build on.” Had the Challenge succeeded, national leaders like Martin Luther King might have reached rioters by telling them “to organize like the sharecroppers did in Mississippi [and] seek the political route out of our problem.” There still would have been “vicious struggle,” he later said, but perhaps “not *arms* struggle.” These might-have-beens, however doubtful, underlined how much the Atlantic City episode contributed to Moses’ increasingly pessimistic world-view.<sup>84</sup>

The most negative results of Atlantic City, however, were the isolation of SNCC and the disintegration of the Mississippi movement. Afterwards SNCC-workers developed tunnel vision. As one said in 1967: “SNCC believed that the rest of the world...was corrupt [so it] began talking about serious independent political action.” This further antagonized its moderate allies, who already attacked SNCC for rejecting the ‘compromise.’ The “very simple” MFDP-delegates “had been rewarded more than they could reasonably have expected, but they felt cheated,” *The New Republic* noted puzzled. Bayard Rustin criticized the MFDP in *Commentary* for not understanding the need to compromise, although, Moses still grumbled years later, he failed to mention its acceptance of Edith Green’s proposal. Criticism of SNCC was “much more negative” than expected, SNCC’s Jim Monsonis wrote Moses in September. He correctly predicted that it cost SNCC much needed “political and financial support.” The Freedom Summer had turned its \$40,000 deficit into a large surplus; by late 1965 SNCC again had to borrow \$10,000 in order to stay afloat.<sup>85</sup>

Most moderates attributed the rejection of the compromise to SNCC rather than the MFDP. Ironically they viewed SNCC’s weight with the MFDP as manipulation but refused to interpret their own behavior similarly. SNCC denied the claim, although one report recognized that “it is perhaps true that without the influence of SNCC the delegation might have accepted the compromise.” Still, it noted, Fannie Lou Hamer and other delegates “fought like hell to have that compromise defeated and might well have succeeded without our assistance.”<sup>86</sup>

<sup>83</sup> Handwritten notes Taylor Branch, January 16, 1991 (Taylor Branch Papers); Sherrod, “Mississippi at Atlantic City,” *The Grain of Salt*, October 12, 1964; Poletta, *Strategy and Identity in 1960’s Black Protest*, 151-153; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Anne Romaine, September 1966/November 14, 1987, Anne Romaine Papers; Lewis and D’Orso, *Walking with the Wind*, 291-292; Anderson, *Bayard Rustin*, 279, 285; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, February 15, 1991, Taylor Branch Papers.

<sup>84</sup> Robert Morquand, “Up the Opportunity Ladder With Algebra,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, 1989, Box 135, Folder 31, Carl and Anne Braden Papers; Moses interview Dittmer, August 15, 1983; Robert Parris Moses, interview by William Chafe, October 7, 1989, Allard Lowenstein Papers; *Freedom On My Mind*, directed by Connie Field and Marilyn Mulford, Clarity Educational Productions, 1994; Waskow, confidential report, 1964, Howard Zinn Papers.

<sup>85</sup> Edward Brown, interview by Harold O. Lewis, June 30, 1967, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University; Carson, *In Struggle*, 169, 173; Kempton, “Conscience of a Convention,” *The New Republic*, September 5, 1964; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 11, 1983, Taylor Branch Papers; Moses interview Carson, 1982; Jim Monsonis to Bob Moses, letter, September 5, 1964, File #0838, Reel 54, Series I, Administrative Files, Washington Office, SNCC Papers.

<sup>86</sup> Report on MFDP, no date (likely Fall 1964), Folder 1, Mendy Samstein Papers.

This confession underlines the tension that existed between Moses' conception of leadership and the reality that bottom-up as well as top-down processes had brought them all to Atlantic City. Throughout SNCC's existence it had carefully tried to balance its desire to nurture grassroots leadership—and by extension the MFDP—while not manipulating it. Although 'facilitation' remained an ideal that could never exist in pure terms, SNCC had nonetheless found ways of building grassroots leadership that strengthened locals' autonomy. Because the MFDP was the result of an unprecedented broad-based effort on the national level that complemented grassroots initiatives in Mississippi, however, maintaining local autonomy became increasingly problematic. All involved—including SNCC—wanted a voice in the outcome.

The reality that the MFDP was not a pure grassroots enterprise lay at the heart of Moses' outburst in Hubert Humphrey's suite too. He had clearly understood the frictions between his ideals and the messy realities of politics, and throughout the summer had walked a tight-rope in between. Suppressing his own emotions, he had continuously sought consensus and acted calmly, deliberately, and rationally to assure that everyone involved at least strove to approximate the ideal as closely as humanly possible. When the episode in Humphrey's suite raised the question head on, however, his allies sacrificed the ideal of grassroots democracy. Seeing his trusted allies engage in power politics in proverbial smoke-filled rooms, to the exclusion of the people they were supposed to be representing, appalled him. As Rauh put it, it was "like a white man hitting him with a whip...everybody had ratted on him." In 1999 Moses confirmed that he had expected the Democratic Party's rejection, but considered the "betrayal" of the people he had trusted the "most difficult."<sup>87</sup>

Bayard Rustin, Allard Lowenstein, Roy Wilkins, and Joseph Rauh joined a growing chorus of 'Old Lefters' in blaming "communist elements" in SNCC for the rejection of the compromise. Rauh wrote Humphrey that the influence of "supposed Communists" like Moses could only be stopped by federal recognition of the "responsible elements in Mississippi," meaning Aaron Henry and other moderate blacks. *Washington Post*-columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak admitted that Moses was "no Communist," but repeatedly criticized him for being "dangerously oblivious to the Communist menace." They replied to a reader that their attacks belonged to an orchestrated move to return the movement to moderate control: "We believe along with many other supporters of Negro rights that the revolutionary stage has passed and now is the time for reform. Accordingly...leadership of the civil rights movement [must] return to the NAACP."<sup>88</sup>

Moderates' version of Atlantic City could dominate public debates because SNCC refused to discuss Communist associations and because its organizational structure did not identify any apparent spokesmen for the media. Moreover, SNCC had not planned a strategy for a rejection. "There has been a complete lack of any public explanations of the attitude and actions of the [FDP] at a time when such is most needed," Jim Monsonis complained to Moses. In 2008 Julian Bond acknowledged that one "could argue convincingly that we should have explained it more clearly." In hindsight, Mary King agreed, SNCC could have published "papers with quotations from local leaders." They should have

<sup>87</sup> Joseph Rauh, interview by Blackside, Inc., October 31, 1985, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries; Joseph Rauh, interview by Anne Romaine, June 16, 1967, Anne Romaine Papers; Handwritten notes Taylor Branch, January 16, 1999, Taylor Branch Papers.

<sup>88</sup> Davis, "Sisters and Brothers All," 113; Woods, *Black Struggle, Red Scare*, 216-218, 235; Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, "Inside Report: Civil Rights—Danger Ahead" and "Inside Report: SNIC Out in the Cold," *The New York Herald*, December 2 1964 and March 28, 1965; Robert Novak to Princeton summer volunteer, letter, April 12, 1965, Box 1, Folder 23, Rowland Evans Jr. and Robert D. Novak Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society; SAC New Orleans to J. Edgar Hoover, letters, January 14 and April 1, 1965, Box 101, Folder 62-109384, David Garrow Freedom of Information Act Collection. Such attacks, however, only served the movement's opposition as the FBI renewed 'Cominfil investigations' of SNCC and COFO.

used its cosmopolitan-educated members too, Bond asserted: "If we were doing this again, we would say, 'listen, we've got this guy, Bob Moses, he's fabulous. You need to talk to him.'" Monsonis already thought of that in 1964. He begged Moses to write a response in "a major magazine" because "nothing else is going [to] stop the slurs...the Convention clearly indicated you as the 'leader' of the delegates, whether you want it or not, and people will have to pay attention to your account of things." Moses never did; by then he was on a plane with Harry and Julie Belafonte, James Forman, and nine other SNCC-workers headed to Africa.<sup>89</sup>

It might not have made any difference anyway: moderates' anger at SNCC was too strong. At a meeting of the groups who participated in Freedom Summer in New York on September 18 for instance, the participants engaged in what Courtland Cox called a "diatribe against Bob and SNCC." The meeting painfully exposed their differences in organizational leadership, and forced the inherent contradictions of SNCC's strategy of grassroots leadership financed by Northern backing into the open. Gloster Current criticized Moses as a mumbling dictator who "left a very negative impression." He denied that the MFDP was a true grassroots enterprise because there were always "suspicious characters" around, meaning SNCC. When SNCC-workers maintained that locals controlled COFO/MFDP, Current's assistant Jim Morsell admitted that this was equally undesirable. If locals made "decisions injurious to [the NAACP's] national interests, no matter how democratic they might be," he said, "we must have a way out." Current agreed: "The NAACP is a disciplined army. No decision is made on lower levels without authorization from the top. Aaron Henry has got to get in line." Their charges against Moses as a director who told other groups to "take it or leave it" were fantastic. As Art Thomas of the National Council of Churches objected, it was "unreal" for "an ad hoc group to meet in New York and determine what should go on" in Mississippi. But the reality was, Bob Spike noted, that "Mississippi is no longer a local problem." Seeing COFO as a "confederation of national organizations" instead of "local groups plus local outlets of national organizations," they demanded an input into its decision-making. Allard Lowenstein proposed a "new central body" based in "structured democracy, not amorphous democracy." When Cox insisted only a "low-level meeting" of Mississippians could determine future direction, Current exploded: "The more I listen to Cox the more I know we need a top level meeting. I have been listening to the crying of people from Mississippi for seventeen years. I don't want to listen to Steptoe...We need a high-level meeting so we can cut away the underbrush."<sup>90</sup>

Strengthened by the requests from B.E. Murph and other Mississippi NAACP-leaders, Gloster Current persuaded his Board of Directors to "sever NAACP relationships with the COFO movement." After informing COFO of the decision at its statewide conference in Jackson on March 7, 1965, Aaron Henry joined Current for a closed NAACP-meeting to discuss plans for an independent summer project in Mississippi. SCLC also planned an independent summer project, SCOPE (Summer Community Organization and Political Education), in six southern states using white volunteers. Despite a reconciliation meeting that Harry Belafonte organized between SNCC and SCLC-leaders, the relationship between the two organizations had further deteriorated, so SCLC decided not to cover Mississippi in SCOPE's range.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>89</sup> Jim Monsonis to Robert Moses, letter, September 5, 1964, File #0838, Reel 54, Series I, Administrative Files, Washington Office, SNCC Papers; Julian Bond, interview by author, Washington, DC, October 27, 2008; Mary King, email interview by author, December 8, 2009.

<sup>90</sup> Meeting National Council of Churches, September 18, 1964, minutes, Box 55, Folder 15, Carl and Anne Braden Papers; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 399-405; Dittmer, *Local People*, 315-317; Carson, *In Struggle*, 137; Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 496-497.

<sup>91</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 341-343; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 11, 1983, Taylor Branch Papers. Moses was not invited to the Belafonte meeting because he was not part of SNCC's national leadership. Especially the Selma-to-Montgomery marches in 1965 accelerated SNCC's strenuous relations with SCLC. SNCC had been working in Selma since February 1963. SCLC arrived on January 2, 1965, after invitations from the local leadership. It started direct action projects, leading to the jailing of 280 blacks in January. King was jailed with over 200 locals after a march on February 1. Two days later a children's march led to the arrest of 300 black school children. During another children's

The NAACP's withdrawal and SCLC's decision to put its resources elsewhere hastened COFO's decline. National CORE pulled out too after fights with its southern chapters over James Farmer's support for the compromise. SNCC realized that its scarce resources were better spent on the MFDP than on the waning COFO. The latter, James Forman noted in April, displayed a "serious problem of leadership of project directors, poor morale, and no programs." With the MFDP ready to substitute, Moses said, COFO simply was "not indispensable anymore." Moreover, because "the Challenge had opened up the state," the federal government, churches, labor, and other organizations now established programs in Mississippi. He considered this "a tremendous breakthrough," but also shared Mary King's observation that this "rendered redundant the role that SNCC and COFO had played." COFO agreed to its own abolition at a Tougaloo meeting on July 27, 1965, and abdicated its resources and projects to the MFDP.<sup>92</sup>

COFO's abolition was a mere formality; it had been defunct since Atlantic City. At a COFO-meeting in Hattiesburg in December 1964 the NAACP's and SCLC's role was already questioned, but, one observer reported, "did not arouse many people to discussion...nobody I have talked to particularly cares what the NAA and Dr. King's groups do." Their withdrawal therefore was not fatal for COFO; its *raison d'être* had always been providing locals with an organization in which *all* black Mississippians felt represented. What accordingly *was* fatal was the loss of internal unity. Since most COFO-members also belonged to the MFDP, the latter's internal split over the compromise along class-lines was replicated in COFO. The traditional black leadership, embarrassed by the rejection, refused to work with the MFDP. They joined the new Loyal Democrats instead, which angered the working-class blacks who dominated the COFO/MFDP-constituencies. The NAACP's departure, justified by SNCC's 'take-over'-attitude and offending 'Beatnik' appearances, widened the gulf. At the March COFO-convention Fannie Lou Hamer blasted Aaron Henry: "How much have the people with suits done? If they, dressed up, had been here, then the kids in jeans wouldn't." Such statements reflected the growing political awareness of some working-class blacks like Hamer. The fact that black leaders like Roy Wilkins and Martin Luther King had stayed in fancy hotels whereas many MFDP-delegates had slept on the floor of the Union Temple church for instance had strengthened their class-based interpretations of the DNC.<sup>93</sup>

Not all MFDP/COFO-members were similarly radicalized. At the March meeting several defended the NAACP, and in many cases, as in Hattiesburg, collaboration between the classes had been and

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march on February 10, 156 teenagers were arrested. SCLC then organized a march from Selma to Montgomery, starting on March 7. SNCC did not participate, but allowed individual members, most notably John Lewis, to join. King did not participate because of church responsibilities in Atlanta. Halfway Highway US 80 state troops greeted the 600 marchers with sticks and tear gas and then let their horses trample on those fallen to the ground. On March 10 SCLC renewed its attempt to march to Montgomery, now strengthened by hundreds of sympathizers including an enraged SNCC. After King escorted the marchers to a police barricade, he led them into prayer and told them to turn around. King had made the decision following talks with Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach and other federal officials, who had agreed that no violence would erupt if the march were aborted. The terminated march infuriated SNCC, who saw it as a sign of meekness and hypocrisy. Eventually the march was completed under federal protection between March 16-24 and SCLC then left Selma to SNCC. As in Albany, Mary King verbalized SNCC's view, "We saw a besieged black community that was left in chaos, with its expectations raised, and its frustrations sharpened, but with no improved or additional instruments for permanent change." (King, *Freedom Song*, 480. For more on Selma, see David Garrow's *Protest at Selma and Bearing the Cross*.)

<sup>92</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 343; Robert Parris Moses, interview by William Chafe, October 7, 1989, Allard Lowenstein Papers; SNCC Executive Meeting, July 12-13, 1965 at Little Rock, Arkansas, minutes, File #0427, Reel 3, Series III, Executive and Central Committees, Executive Committee, SNCC Papers; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Anne Romaine, September 1966/November 14, 1987, Anne Romaine Papers; King, *Freedom Song*, 523.

<sup>93</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 342-343, 347-348; Lee, *For Freedom's Sake*, 100, 116-117; Martin and Victoria Nicolaus, letter, December 9, 1964, Martin and Victoria Nicolaus Papers; Ed King, interview by Anne Romaine, August 29, 1966, transcript, Anne Romaine Papers; Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 159; Davis, "Sisters and Brothers All," 93-94.

continued to be possible. Moreover, most MFDP-members wanted to remain a protest group within the Democratic Party rather than becoming a militant third party. Unlike SNCC, most of them had left the DNC proudly. After all, one COFO-volunteer observed, "They had the president of the United States stop for them." Mississippi blacks who stayed home were similarly affected. One cheered with joy when she watched the sit-in on TV: "All the time till now I never seen no nigger in a convention, but they was there! Lots of them!" Even Lawrence Guyot dismissed "independent political organizing [as] dangerous." Most black Mississippians "felt no particular need to be part of an alternative political order," historian Emily Stoper explained. "Having not yet gained the right to participate in standard, two-party politics, they were hardly in a position to reject it."<sup>94</sup>

Many Mississippi blacks did not have any radical ideas about "freedom:" most simply wanted to attain concrete things, like cars, better jobs, and decent housing. Several COFO-members accepted jobs in the new federal poverty programs, which paid salaries of \$125 a week. "At some point in your life," Moses explained, "you got to earn over \$30 a week. Don't you?" He did not see "this as the way to go" because it made them unable "to criticize the government." But he understood that attaining middle-class status was a logical reward for their suffering: "People were trying to make good on the gains that they [had] just struggled for." Consequently, historian John Dittmer concluded, it was inevitable that Mississippi's "grassroots insurgency transformed into a more moderate reform movement, one willing to sacrifice the needs of the poor to obtain rewards for the black middle class."<sup>95</sup>

Yet in all social revolutions there are periods which are experienced as setbacks but in hindsight are seen as advanced. The same could be argued for the MFDP because "in the long run," Ivanhoe Donaldson admitted, "from a franchise point of view...the party won." The Democratic Party kept its promise to integrate its activities on all levels. Future delegations had to consist of minority and white delegates confirm their states' racial composition and pledge party loyalty. The 1972 McGovern Rules expanded these guidelines to further ensure fair representation of minorities and women. The Challenge additionally spurred the acceptance of Southern blacks into the political process and the Democratic Party's ranks. The MFDP had strengthened President Johnson's commitment to ending black disfranchisement: immediately after his reelection in November 1964 he ordered the Justice Department to draft appropriate legislation. The subsequent Voting Rights Act of 1965, which ruled discriminatory voting practices unconstitutional, ensured that by 1968 almost 60% of eligible black Mississippians were registered to vote. Consequently the number of black elected officials grew from 1,469 nationwide in 1968 to 9,040 in the year 2000; 1,628 of them live in Mississippi and Alabama.<sup>96</sup>

The MFDP's continued activism—in 1979 Moses noted with pride that in some counties the MFDP still existed—also helped force the Voting Rights Act's adoption. In 1965 the MFDP organized another national enterprise, the Congressional Challenge, which demonstrated through hundreds of depositions from locals that Mississippi's Congressmen were elected illegitimately. While the bloody civil rights marches in Selma in March 1965 helped national politicians in persuading the general public to accept

<sup>94</sup> Mr. and Mrs. Henry to Dave Dennis, letter, no date (likely March 1965), Box 4, Folder 5, Robert Beech Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society; Lawrence Guyot, interview by KZSU Radio Station Stanford University, 1965, transcript, KZSU Project South Interview Collection, Microfiche 2479 (E), Library of Congress; Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 42, 110.

<sup>95</sup> Sutherland-Martinez, *Letters from Mississippi*, 259; Don Chapman, interview by KZSU Radio Station Stanford University, 1965, transcript, KZSU Project South Interview Collection, Microfiche 2479 (E), Library of Congress; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, July 31, 1984, Taylor Branch Papers; "Moses in Mississippi Raises Some Universal Questions," *Pacific Scene*, February 3, 1965; Dittmer, *Local People*, 429.

<sup>96</sup> David A. Bositis, "Black Elected Officials: A Statistical Summary 2000," abstract, January 2001, Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, <http://www.jointcenter.org/research/black-elected-officials-a-statistical-summary-2000> (accessed March 12, 2012); Ivanhoe Donaldson, interview by William Chafe, no date, Allard Lowenstein Papers; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 194; Bell Gale Chevigny, "The Fruits of Freedom Summer," *The Nation*, August 8-15, 1994; Greenberg, ed., *Circle of Trust*, 66; Marsh, *God's Long Summer*, 43-44.

the Act, behind-the-scenes the MFDP's work had made the opening salvo. Politicians, Ed King explained in 2010, do not "pass a new law because people are in the streets...[T]hey need to say 'we did this with reason, with calm. We had thousands of documents.'" Simultaneously President Lyndon Johnson's fears proved correct: his push for civil rights legislation cost the Democratic Party the South for generations. To this day the Republican Party has effectively capitalized on the Dixiecrats' former constituencies, leading to continued blockage of numerous social reform bills on the state and federal level.<sup>97</sup>

Moses was thus right when he predicted in 1964 that "it'll take about 50 years...for [grassroots] people to get in the Democratic Party and figure out whether it could work." All this ultimately opened the way for Barack Obama's nomination as the Democratic Party's presidential candidate. During Obama's inauguration Moses was in Washington as well. At one radio station he proudly credited the MFDP for setting the stage "that allowed this to happen." But it was a victory paid at SNCC's and his own expense.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Ed King, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 14, 2010; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 318; Dittmer, *Local People*, 338-341, 351-352; Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 417-425.

<sup>98</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, February 15, 1991, Taylor Branch Papers; Watson, *Freedom Summer*, 298.



## 10. Not A Happy Time

### 10.1. Crisis of Victory

Within the next year Moses lost everything dear to him. His consensus-based organizational leadership approach faltered through the heavy toll of Freedom Summer and 'Atlantic City.' This led to a new phase in the national and local movements, a development that again suggests the need to qualify the 'long civil rights movement' theoretical framework. "The Movement never really recuperated from that summer," Moses sighed in 1989, "and the price [of] freeing Mississippi was the destabilization of SNCC," COFO, and his own emotional well-being. He wandered the nation and globe "looking for some kind of answers," as an increasingly hierarchical SNCC embraced black nationalism. Yet Moses retained his faith in his organizational leadership approach. It would therefore be incorrect to suggest, as have many movement veterans and historians, to describe this period in his life as mere disillusionment.<sup>1</sup>

After 'Atlantic City' it was clear that a Voting Rights Act was in sight and that, as Moses said in 1966, "the voting registration drive was finished...that part of the movement was over." This led SNCC and other civil rights organizations into what A. Philip Randolph termed "the crisis of victory": at its highest point of achievement, disillusionment eroded workers' morale as they did not know how to proceed. By endorsing voting rights President Johnson paradoxically deprived SNCC of the sole program it had been able to sustain for four consecutive years. SNCC-workers answered this challenge with the theory of 'let the people decide.' But faced with the reality that 'Atlantic City' had rendered a unitary concept of 'the people' void, it became more of a slogan than a realistic organizing strategy. SNCC-workers were in any case unprepared for a thoroughgoing debate on strategy. "We were kind of at loose ends," Julian Bond described the SNCC of 1964-1965, "There was no plan...you're just whipped, dead, beat, drained. Everything had been built up toward [the DNC] and no-one looked beyond."<sup>2</sup>

Moses, too, faced the daunting question of the next step. "I had said to myself and to Amzie that I would stay until we saw this [voting] program through," he disclosed in 1987. "[I] hadn't ever committed myself to stay in Mississippi forever." Until spring 1965 Moses worked on a variety of projects. Between September and November he discussed SNCC's educational programs with Ella Baker and Myles Horton, and arranged leadership workshops for FDP-members. He spoke at fundraising dinners in Chicago and New York. Launching COFO's Legal Advisory Committee, he recruited radical lawyers Ben Smith, William Kunstler, and Arthur Kinoy; other participants included Gene Cotton, the General Counsel of the United Packinghouse Workers, law professors from Columbia University and the ACLU, and eminent attorney Morton Stavis. December saw him speaking to the Benton County FDP, working on the Radio Tougaloo Project (a 'freedom radio' directed by locals), and attending the Sea Island Folk Festival to learn more about developing grassroots festivals in COFO-projects. He invited folk singers to organize workshops in the Mississippi Delta; in March he led a workshop on folk dancing himself. But although he tried to reconstitute some feeling of movement unity, he gradually recognized that his approach was out of step with the *Zeitgeist* and that his utility in SNCC had run out.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cathy Cade, "Mississippi Summer Twenty-Five Years Later," in *Freedom Is A Constant Struggle*, ed. Erenrich, 421-425 (Transcript of comments during 25<sup>th</sup> commemoration of the Mississippi Summer Project in Berkeley, California, on June 17, 1989); Robert Parris Moses, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 15, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by Anne Romaine, September 1966/November 14, 1987, Anne Romaine Papers; Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 329-330; Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 42; Polletta, *Strategy and Identity in 1960's Black Protest*, 151-152, 177-178.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by Anne Romaine, September 1966/November 14, 1987, Anne Romaine Papers; Moses to Eleanor Holm et al., letter, September 9, 1964, Box 3, Folder 4, Hunter R. Morey Papers; Tapes "Freedom School Workshop March 27-April 7 [1965]," Reel 2, Lucille Montgomery Papers; Horton to Baker, letter, October 2, 1964, and Conrad Browne to Moses, letter, October 29, 1964, and Connie to Horton, memorandum, no date, and Liz

At the heart of Moses' and his colleagues' 'crisis of victory' lay the tension between their grassroots model for social change and reality. SNCC's philosophy, historian Francesca Polletta said, had not only "obscured differences of interest...within black communities," but also "between students and rural black residents." SNCC had gradually adopted a political view that was dismissive of the middle-class in favor of the 'uneducated masses,' while the latter paradoxically moved closer to the former in their political orientation. As one FDP-leader explained: "Success breeds moderation." In 1967 SNCC-worker Ed Brown astutely described the contradictory situation SNCC-workers found themselves in after Freedom Summer: "[President Johnson had] taken over our program [and] the community people...were overjoyed and enthusiastic about it [while] we were very satirical and very bitter about it."<sup>4</sup>

Rather than admitting that they might need to revise some of their political assumptions, most SNCC-workers refused to alter their conception of leadership, thus widening their distance from locals. "What is needed," SNCC-workers stated in one report, is "to make sure that many more people like Mrs. Hamer and Mrs. Devine emerge who are militant enough to command our confidence." Consequently, Brown said, several workers began to "force our various points of views on the community...[They] only wanted local people to decide when [they decided] in accordance with what the staff thought; and when local people deviated, then they were to be ostracized." Some workers laid so much stress upon giving uneducated people a voice that it embarrassed such locals. Even Moses was guilty of this: in February 1965 he reintroduced a notion that no-one with an education above the twelfth grade should become a member of SNCC's Executive Committee. Feeling patronized, Fannie Lou Hamer instantly had her name withdrawn.<sup>5</sup>

The differences between SNCC-workers and locals revealed themselves most clearly over the MFDP's pro-Democratic Party direction. The MFDP kept its promise to "work unstintingly" for President Johnson's reelection, and its Congressional Challenge was another attempt to become part of an established structure that most SNCC-workers no longer trusted. Workers who did support it, one volunteer recalled, merely did so "to *prove* the Democrats didn't mean what they said."<sup>6</sup>

The MFDP's gravitation toward the Democratic Party proved especially difficult for Moses to accept; he believed that it should become an independent political force. "We are raising fundamental questions about how the poor sharecropper can achieve the Good Life," he explained in 1965, "questions that liberalism is incapable of answering." Joseph Rauh claimed that Moses left the DNC stating: "You cannot trust the system. I will have nothing to do with the political system any longer." While the opinion is exaggerated—Arthur Waskow wrote shortly afterwards how much Moses respected Edith Green as someone who showed "that it was possible to stay within the political system and yet be committed to a decent moral principle"—he did believe "it was useless to try to work with the Democratic Party." As he stated in 1983, "if everyone saw their own particular personal position as somehow more important [than] the long range evolution of the country[,] then it seemed like they really were devoid of any

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Fusco to Horton, letter, September 2, 1964, Box 9, Folder 23, Highlander Research and Education Center Collection; David Finkelstein to Moses, letter, January 4, 1965, File #0842, and "Summary of Status of Radio Tougaloo Project," memorandum, December 7, 1964, File #0843, Reel 14, Series VII, Communications Department, Public Relations, and Ralph Rapoport to Bob and Dona Moses, letter, September 21, 1964, File #1131, Reel 38, and "Moses to Speak at Tuesday's Meeting," *Benton County Freedom Train*, December 21, 1964, File #1228, Reel 37, Series XV, State Project Files, SNCC Papers; Guy Carawan and Candie Carawan, "Carry It On," in *Freedom Is A Constant Struggle*, ed. Erenrich, 148;

<sup>4</sup> Polletta, *Strategy and Identity in 1960's Black Protest*, 154-155, 178; Willie Johnson, interview by KZSU Radio Station Stanford University, 1965, transcript, KZSU Project South Interview Collection, Microfiche 2479 (E), Library of Congress; Ed Brown, interview by Harold O. Lewis, June 30, 1967, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University.

<sup>5</sup> Report on MFDP, no date (likely Fall 1964), Folder 1, Mendy Samstein Papers; Ed Brown, interview by Harold O. Lewis, June 30, 1967, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University; Lee, *For Freedom's Sake*, 137-138; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 438; "Loyalty Resolution," memorandum, no dates, Box 1, Folder 4, Iris Greenberg Freedom Summer Collection.

<sup>6</sup> Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Committee*, 258.

real substance.” Moses contended that the Democratic Party had used the MFDP to abstract a loyalty oath from the Regulars. At a November *National Guardian*-dinner he castigated the thinking of the administration: “Mrs. Hamer? How can she be seated? She’s [allegedly] not legal [but are] the [Regulars] legal? They had the real election. No they didn’t! They had the mock election. We had the real election!” The Congressional Challenge, he told *The Village Voice*, would become a repetition of ‘Atlantic City’: “The President will be against us[,] but he will try to use us to blackmail the committee chairmen to get his legislation [passed and]...in the end no-one will be for seating us...because to face the truth of our claim would rip this nation apart.”<sup>7</sup>

Moses opposed the Congressional Challenge because he regarded it as a media-based enterprise that deviated from developing MFDP-members. He wanted to strengthen the MFDP’s base by letting members run for MFDP-offices after having trained them extensively in the political process. The MFDP should “keep a regional focus” until it was ready to go national again. Many of SNCC’s problems in 1965, he explained in 1984, resulted from its decision “to go national too quick.” Many Freedom Summer projects faltered after the volunteers left because local leadership was not yet capable of taking them over. The MFDP risked making the same mistake. “It would have been better to really focus exclusively on organizing the base of the party,” he repeated in 2010, “because there is only so much energy[,] money [and] time.” Staughton Lynd recorded that Moses was more “hostile toward organizing which placed undo emphasis on media coverage” than ever. “Let the event happen [and] then there will be something to report,” he now argued repetitively.<sup>8</sup>

Having been so close to national success, however, most MFDP-members were unwilling to adopt such a long-range view. It was hard for them “to do the same kind of thing that had been done in Mississippi before,” Moses reflected in 1984. “[I]t was more glamorous to...get your lawyers [and] FDP-people together and take them to Washington.” This “glamour-trend” was exacerbated when Lawrence Guyot led several marches in Jackson in which hundreds of people were arrested. Moreover, the MFDP decided to organize its own summer project in 1965 using Northern white volunteers, albeit fewer than in 1964. Although deeply skeptical, Moses declined to openly oppose the MFDP’s plans because “there was no way to take that disagreement to the people without clashing with Guyot.” His principle that locals such as Guyot should decide the MFDP’s destiny was “more important” than rectifying what he felt was a wrong direction for the movement. Now that the MFDP carried the bulk of the work in Mississippi, he felt that SNCC could no longer justify an input in the decision-making. SNCC’s and “my time had run out,” Moses stoically concluded in 2010, “I had had my shot.”<sup>9</sup>

The MFDP’s growing independence exacerbated SNCC’s ‘crisis of victory.’ It had developed grassroots leadership, but felt disenchanting with the result. “At what point should SNCC withdraw? And if SNCC organized something [that] developed in a way that SNCC didn’t like, what should SNCC do?” SNCC-workers discussed these questions endlessly but without coming to any clear answer. They compared the MFDP to “a child becoming independent of its parents;” and in this “weaning process...hostility toward SNCC was running high.” Ironically, SNCC felt like SCLC when the sit-in students exerted their independence but still asked money: the MFDP was \$8,000 in debt and depended on SNCC for resources. A COFO-report noted that

<sup>7</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 318, 320-321; Jack Newfield, “The Liberals’ Big Stick,” *Cavalier*, June 1965; Anderson, *Bayard Rustin*, 278; Waskow, confidential report, 1964, Howard Zinn Papers; Moses interview Dittmer, 1983; Carson, *In Struggle*, 128; Bob Moses, “Speech at *National Guardian* dinner November 24, 1964,” transcript, File #0810, Reel 59, Series III, Other Organizations, Washington Office, SNCC Papers; Newfield, “Moses in Mississippi,” *The Village Voice*, December 3, 1964.

<sup>8</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 326; Moses interview Dittmer, 1983; Moses interview Carson, 1982; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Joe Sinsheimer, December 5, 1984, Taylor Branch Papers; Robert Parris Moses, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 15, 2010; Lynd, “Mississippi: 1961-1962,” 7.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by Joe Sinsheimer, December 5, 1984, and interview by Taylor Branch, February 15, 1991, Taylor Branch Papers; Dittmer, *Local People*, 326, 344-346; Moses interview Dittmer, 1983; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Anne Romaine, September 1966/November 14, 1987, Anne Romaine Papers; Robert Parris Moses, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 15, 2010.

SNCC-workers displayed an “unconscious resistance to letting go of the reins.” They felt a “need to retain a sense of our own importance,” but also believed—with some justification—that most locals, as one FDP-leader admitted, were not “ready to assume responsibilities.” Workers in the MFDP-summer project likewise complained of locals’ passivity. “[T]here is a strong tendency in much [of what] we do to make local people errand boys,” one wrote, because “we are the only ones who know what we are doing.”<sup>10</sup>

Predicting that the MFDP summer project would see a repetition of the 1964 problems between locals and volunteers, SNCC had not wanted it to happen. It was especially averse to seeing another influx of more white Northerners; the psychological strains of an integrated movement had proven to be too maddening. Whites’ skills and locals’ gratitude for their presence seemed to confirm black workers’ inferiority. Consequently, one said, “the white-black question [came] up at every meeting.” Blacks, white workers recorded in 1965, constantly “[yelled that] there shouldn’t be any white people in the movement [because] they always want to take over [and] when it really comes down to [it will] stand with the other white people against us.” They felt, Moses explained in 1983, that the movement “belongs to them” because “it’s their energy that made it.” Some even treated whites as subordinates, leaving one white to rant at a black worker: “You’re a dictator, a little Caesar. You’re everything I’m against in the movement!” A December 1964 COFO-report noted that “white workers are often subject to severe racial abuse and even violence.” Moses watched this with sadness. Whites were “looked upon as other people. Just as the society looks upon Negroes,” he sighed in 1983, “Then there are very deep tensions. They’re too complicated to describe. They’re the kind of things that don’t seem to be exhaustible...the deep things come welling out like poison and they spew out all over everybody.”<sup>11</sup>

The fact that 200 volunteers had wanted to stay in Mississippi in the fall of 1964 fuelled these tensions. Because SNCC-workers rarely met during the summer for long-time planning, they had not anticipated this. At a conference Moses organized at Tougaloo between August 17-19 COFO-workers tried to “select summer volunteers that could remain.” Eventually it was decided that volunteers who wished to stay would constitute a SNCC-supervised but Northern-financed “freedom force.” Essentially they could remain but move in a vacuum. “No-one actually was thinking about trying to take the students and use them as an organized force,” Moses acknowledged in 1984. Most SNCC-workers preferred for them to go. “There wasn’t enough in the black community to hold the whole,” Moses explained in a heartrending mea culpa at a 1989 Freedom Summer reunion. “We couldn’t all be in that one little space...we didn’t see any way to strike a consensus so that you could all be together [in a way] that wouldn’t tear people apart.”<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> “Relations between SNCC and the MFDP,” memorandum John Lewis with minutes SNCC Meeting in Atlanta, no date, Files #1195-1196, Reel 1, Series I, Chairman Files John Lewis, SNCC Papers; King, *Freedom Song*, 493; Report on MFDP, no date (likely Fall 1964), Folder 1, Mendy Samstein Papers; Emma Sanders, interview by Robert Wright, July 8, 1969, transcript, Ralph J. Bunch Collection, Howard University; Mary Brumder, letter, no date, Box 1, Folder 6, Samuel Walker Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society. Moreover, ineffectiveness occurred because “the best people accept so many jobs they can’t do them,” and using the same people repetitively ensured that small groups of ‘strong’ individuals still told “the other people on the plantation how to vote [and] where to go.” (Dave Dennis, Eugene Turitz, Lee Dilworth, Edith Black, Anonymous White Female, interviews by KZSU Radio Station Stanford University, 1965, transcripts, KZSU Project South Interview Collection, Microfiche 2479 (E), Library of Congress)

<sup>11</sup> Fleming, *Soon We Will Not Cry*, 170-171; Moses interview Dittmer, 1983; “Black and White Together: The Freedom Summer Experience,” report, November 13, 1980, William Heath Papers; Pat McGauley, interview by KZSU Radio Station Stanford University, 1965, transcripts, KZSU Project South Interview Collection, Microfiche 2479 (E), Library of Congress; Hunter R. Morey, “Cross Roads in COFO,” report, December 3, 1964, File #1050, Reel 42, Series XVII, Other Organizations, SNCC Papers; Dittmer, *Local People*, 330.

<sup>12</sup> Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 374, 420; Bob Moses to COFO Staff, memorandum, August 1964, James Forman Papers, Library of Congress; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Joe Sinsheimer, December 5, 1984, Taylor Branch Papers; Cade, “Mississippi Summer Twenty-Five Years Later,” in *Freedom Is A Constant Struggle*, ed. Erenrich, 420-421; Dittmer, *Local People*, 319.

As scholars Gary Marx and Michael Useem have demonstrated, the intensity of internal interracial conflicts often depends on the degree to which movement goals are attained. When organizers fail to see meaningful social change, it is common for pressures to “develop on outsiders to reduce their level of involvement or to withdraw altogether.” This process was repeated within the disillusioned SNCC. Its failure to keep up the self-evaluation sessions of its early years exacerbated this. As one worker remarked: “[I’ve been] on the SNCC-staff for three years, and I still don’t know what SNCC is.” Others had complained in June that “SNCC lacks a feeling of community” and decried workers’ growing unwillingness “to travel to other projects to learn.” Moreover, the volunteers had not had the opportunity and time to learn by trial-and-error, as SNCC-workers had. “If one doesn’t really trust someone in the organization,” one SNCC-worker therefore noted in a November meeting, “it is because we haven’t taught trust there.” It is “possible for even a large-scale movement to operate as a band of brothers,” Dianne Nash insisted years later. “The reason [the redemptive community-idea dissipated] wasn’t that new people came in [but] we did not devote enough time and energy into [their] education.”<sup>13</sup>

In 1964 Staughton Lynd blamed this lack of self-evaluation on SNCC’s “mystique of action which forever interrupts the process of thinking ahead.” As early as its December 1963 meeting several workers pleaded to “define ideology” and “establish specific goals,” although these were very ‘un-SNCC’-like objectives. But Moses bore part of the responsibility for this failing too. In attempting to win support for Freedom Summer, he forestalled the discussion of what he felt would be divisive issues. “After the summer these problems of structure, philosophy, and conflict can be discussed more thoroughly,” he quelled discussions at the June meeting. “I don’t share your concern about these problems, possibly because I have a very limited idea of what we’ll be able to accomplish.” Staughton Lynd documented that he had pressed Moses, Courtland Cox, and Tim Jenkins since March 1964 to sketch “out some sort of vision and program as to what sorts of measures will ultimately solve [inequality].” But wary of the dogmas that had restrained other organizations, they dismissed this on principle. Lynd considered this a mistake. “There is a question as to how many people will continue to risk their lives for limited goals,” he predicted in June.<sup>14</sup>

When the summer indeed accomplished more than expected but revealed that getting the vote alone did not eradicate inequality, Moses’ approach caught up with him. As Lynd correctly observed, “[t]he penalty for non-ideological thinking is an undercurrent of despair.” “I’m ready to die,” Ruby Doris Smith, Charles Sherrod, and others stated, “but I need a program worth dying for!” They demanded that SNCC define its purpose. “As an organization we have never decided whether or not we want to be: (1) agitators (2) demonstrators or (3) organizers,” one complained in November, “and we can’t fool ourselves into believing that we can be all three.” The need to distinguish between reform and revolution became an often-repeated charge in SNCC-meetings. “Our orientation must always be towards eliminating causes rather than trying to make their effects more bearable for a few. This is what makes us different from a goddamn social welfare agency,” some workers crudely asserted in a paper. Such proclamations of revolutionary purposes were eventually translated into ‘Black Power,’ SNCC’s first systematic definition of society’s wrongs and its programmatic solutions.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Gary T. Marx, and Michael Useem, “Majority Involvement in Minority Movements: Civil Rights, Abolition, Untouchability,” *Journal of Social Issues* 27, no. 1 (winter 1971): 81-104; SNCC Executive Committee Meeting, June 9-11, 1964, minutes, Files #0975-0992, Reel 3, Series III, Staff Meetings, and SNCC meeting at Waveland, November 6-12, 1964, minutes, Files #0935-0957, Reel 11, Series V, SNCC Conferences, SNCC Papers; Greenberg, ed., *A Circle of Trust*, 21-22; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 215-216.

<sup>14</sup> Staughton Lynd, “SNCC: The Beginning of Ideology,” August 1964, Box 1, Folder 3, Mary King Papers; Lynd to Zinn, letter, June 12, 1964, Box 2, Folder 7, Howard Zinn Papers; SNCC Executive Committee Meeting, June 9-11, 1964, Files # 0975-0992, minutes, Reel 3, Series III, Staff Meetings, and Meeting of the SNCC Executive Committee, December 27-31, 1963, minutes, Files #0313-0328, Reel 3, Series II, Executive and Central Committees, Executive Committee, SNCC Papers; Carson, *In Struggle*, 105, 124; Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 106.

<sup>15</sup> Lynd, “SNCC: The Beginning of Ideology,” August 1964, Box 1, Folder 3, Mary King Papers; Lynd to Zinn, letter, June 12,

Moses rejected any such ideological answers. To salvage SNCC's quest for a new goal, he recounted in 1991, workers should have reduced "their scope back to what they were good at and what their true purpose was," that is, becoming an "organization of organizers." Returning to slow, long-range organizing could also end intra-organizational rivalry, he argued in April 1965: "[Adopting a] different timetable gives you a different [organizing] context" and "will also get us out of the race with [Martin Luther] King, SCOPE, etc." During a September 1964 Executive Committee meeting he reiterated his idea to have a local run against Senator Eastland in 1967. In April he proposed another long-range plan: "LBJ will be re-elected in '68, so we should aim for the national elections of '72." Anticipating that Robert Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey would then vie over the presidential nomination, he figured that the South could "play a critical role" in the primaries. "Between now and '72 we should organize people across the country in a network independent of the Democrats. Kennedy and Humphrey will be forced to go to this network."<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, a return to small-time organizing was necessary because following locals' desires led SNCC-workers more and more into the question of economic power. One report warned that in 1965 "SNCC is going to have to deal...increasingly often" with "areas where voting is relatively easy, and facilities are ostensibly integrated, but where the poor jobs-poor education-poor conditions cycle remains unbroken." Breaking it required specialized and patient organizing techniques. However, as Moses had explained at their December 1963 meeting, SNCC-workers lacked both. "I thought that you knew ways to tell us which way to go, who to contact," a surprised Unita Blackwell for instance told SNCC-workers when she got rebuffed in her request for help in building a hospital. At the November meeting, discussion of economic programs led nowhere "because we ran out of knowledge." SNCC then organized a Labor Conference at Highlander in January 1965, but, a report noted, "the discussion was at a vocabulary level far above [locals'] understanding, and we lost them." Another attempt at discussion in February was again fruitless. SNCC-workers, one annoyed participant wrote, were "concerned with things other than a social and economic program": the reality that SNCC needed specialized, disciplined workers had led to a debate about needing a more bureaucratized structure to assess workers' efficiency. SNCC helped black Mississippians run for election in the federal Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Committee, and helped them found the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union and the Poor People's Corporation of Mississippi, which facilitated black-owned cooperatives. But since SNCC lacked an overarching vision of social and political change, the overall result, as one worker already predicted in November, was "the development of a series of separate institutions that don't relate to one another."<sup>17</sup>

Most SNCC-workers were unwilling to retreat into obscurity and allow locals to replace them. SNCC should "get at the roots of power...in counties which affect the national power structure," Courtland Cox argued in October 1964. "We must stop being parochial." "People were not willing to just say, okay,

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1964, Box 2, Folder 7, Howard Zinn Papers; Charles Sherrod, position paper, Box 6, Folder 1, and "Semi-Introspective," anonymous position paper, Box 6, Folder 6, Ella Baker Papers (See also Files #0440-0443, Reel 3, Series II, Executive and Central Committees, Executive Committee, SNCC-Papers); "SNCC's Goals and [Bourgeois] Sentimentality," anonymous position paper, no date (likely fall 1964), Box 1, Folder 2, Stuart Ewen Papers; Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 106.

<sup>16</sup> SNCC Executive Committee Meeting, September 4, 1964, minutes, and Alabama SNCC Workshop, April 21-23, 1965, minutes, Box 1, Folder 3, Mary King Papers.

<sup>17</sup> Workshop Proposal, no title, no date (1964), Box 1, Folder 2, Stuart Ewen Papers; Walter Tillow to Linda Seese, letter, January 5, 1965, and Hershel Kaminsky to Tillow, letter, February 10 1965, and SNCC Labor Conference, Box 1, Folder 2, Walter Tillow Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society; SNCC Meeting at Waveland, November 6-12, 1964, minutes, Files #0935-0957, Reel 11, Series V, SNCC Conferences, and Roy Shields, "Overall Report, Southwest Georgia," February, 1965, Files #0344-0349, Reel 19, Series VIII, Research Department, SNCC Papers; Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 15-16, 35. For more on the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union, the AFSC-elections, and the Poor People's Corporation, see *The Voice*, April 30, August 30, and December 30, 1965, in *The Student Voice*, ed. Carson, 215-218, 219-222, 227, 231-233, and Dittmer, *Local People*, 332-334.



we had [Freedom Summer], we got certain benefits from it [and] we can now go back under and pick up where we left off," Moses reflected in 1984. This, Jane Stembridge observed, underscored the contrast between Moses and many of the younger Southern black SNCC-workers. The latter "turned to people who seemed more militant, who talked louder [and] with more anger [whereas] Bob would outline much more basic long-range crucial goals. They were harder for [them] to grasp...[They wanted to] act right now."<sup>18</sup>

In retrospect, Moses viewed the growth of militancy in SNCC as one of the unintended consequences of Freedom Summer. SNCC-workers developed a desire for "taking the kind of charisma that had developed around the Summer Project and making it a kind of permanent part of SNCC," contributing to SNCC's embrace of Black Power. Freedom Summer also strengthened James Forman's belief that only a 'revolutionary' "mass-based student movement" led by "a strong, centralized organization" could overcome racial inequality. He therefore advocated a new, south-wide summer project with black volunteers, the Black Belt Project,<sup>19</sup> in order to create a visible black political unit that could compete for power within the national political system.<sup>20</sup>

## 10.2. Freedom High

For the Mississippi movement, COFO's disappearance and the abdication of its programs to the unsteady MFDP were perhaps worse than SNCC's internal struggles. Yet the latter was not unrelated to the former. SNCC's infighting, coupled with negative publicity, led to its growing inability to finance and staff COFO-projects. Moses felt in retrospect that COFO could have been resurrected on a "common issue" that benefitted the entire black community in the way that voter registration had done—issues like his educational programs or the new poverty programs being fostered by the Office of Economic Opportunity. But no-one "thought through and far enough ahead," he said in 1982, because SNCC-workers were too "distracted in so many different ways."<sup>21</sup>

One serious distraction was workers' physical and mental burn-out. "When I look back it feels like 20 years folded into four," Moses often reflected. This was a universal SNCC-problem. One worker wrote in April 1964 that she desired a transfer from Arkansas after only five months because "working long periods in the same area...tends to lead each of us into a kind of rut—stagnation: we lose perspective." The summer's disillusioning events accelerated such feelings. Workers and volunteers could not but evaluate America through the lens of their Mississippi experiences. "When you're in Mississippi, the rest of America doesn't seem real. And when you're in the rest of America, Mississippi doesn't seem real," Moses related. But the events in Atlantic City convinced many SNCC-workers that there *was* no dichotomy between Mississippi and America. As Ed King said in 1979: "Moses said that 'Mississippi is a mirror to America,'

<sup>18</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by Joe Sinsheimer, December 5, 1984, Taylor Branch Papers; Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 253; SNCC Staff Meeting October 11, 1964, minutes, Files #1016-1021, Reel 3, Series III, Staff Meetings, SNCC Papers.

<sup>19</sup> The Black Belt Project intended to reach 27 Congressional Districts with black majorities whose social-economic conditions included "severe poverty, police state oppression, and the almost complete exclusion of the Negro population from the political process." These were the 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> districts in Arkansas, the 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup> districts in Louisiana, all five Mississippi districts, the first five districts in Alabama, the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> districts in Georgia, the 1<sup>st</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> districts in South Carolina, the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 7<sup>th</sup> districts in North Carolina, and the 4<sup>th</sup> district in Virginia. The emphasis was on black volunteers to avoid further racial conflicts. They would mainly be involved in voting registration, building FDP-like political organizations, community centers, freedom schools, federal and unionization programs. ("Outline for Projected Black Belt Program" and "Black Belt Program," memoranda, Files #0779-0782, Reel 20, Series VIII, Research Department, SNCC Papers; Carson, *In Struggle*, 138; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 416-417)

<sup>20</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by Joe Sinsheimer, December 5, 1984, Taylor Branch Papers; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 412, 416, 424-425; Carson; SNCC Staff Meeting October 11, 1964, minutes, Files #1016-1021, Reel 3, Series III, Staff Meetings, SNCC Papers.

<sup>21</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 343-344; Moses interview Dittmer, 1983; Robert Parris Moses, interview by William Chafe, October 7, 1989, Allard Lowenstein Papers; Moses interview Carson, 1982.

and we discovered to our horror that that was true.” The summer, Moses repeated in 1983, “brought Mississippi, for better or worse, up to the level of the rest of the country.”<sup>22</sup>

Moses had tried to prepare Mississippi blacks for rejection at the DNC, but what “we didn’t count on,” he said in 1982, “was the need to educate the SNCC-staff about what happened.” Consequently cynicism and demoralization set in. Workers in other states shared this disillusionment. In Georgia, one wrote, SNCC’s unsuccessful desegregation campaigns left them “demoralized, immobile, and disgusted.” Such frustrations led to a growing inability to function effectively. “I become petty and chauvinistic about my particular work, unable to get along with people in other fields, and slightly inhuman in my own,” another wrote. Theft and delinquency occurred increasingly often in SNCC-offices. Many workers suffered from what psychiatrist Robert Coles called “battle fatigue,” a state of mind comparable to shellshock or posttraumatic stress disorder. They experienced “clinical signs of depression” like “exhaustion, weariness, despair, frustration, and rage.” Others sought relief through alcohol and marijuana, or suffered from insomnia and ulcers due to tensions, bad living conditions, and malnutrition. One worker in Belzoni described his project head as a “shell...he’s twenty-one [but the] guy is wasted.”<sup>23</sup>

Living in constant fear of violence was the most nerve-wrecking. In *The Student Voice* Mendy Samstein poignantly described witnessing the McComb bombings: Everyone “instantly knows what that sound means [and] the moments of torment that follow—whose house, who is dead? It’s not mine. Then who? My neighbor, my friend—my mother, my brother, my son, or maybe SNCC again. Who? And one’s stomach aches with pain and the pain seeps up into the chest and the head and comes out of every [pore].” Veterans like Stokely Carmichael suffered multiple breakdowns following years of experiencing racial violence, torments that spurred their transition to Black Power. In an extreme case, the tensions that volunteer Dennis Sweeney suffered aggravated his psychoses that led him to murder Allard Lowenstein in 1980<sup>24</sup>. Even Alvin Poussaint, whom Moses had invited to help them cope, returned from Mississippi needing therapy.<sup>25</sup>

Having been in Mississippi longer than any SNCC-worker, Moses inevitably suffered from ‘battle fatigue’ too. He now fell back into his periodic bouts of depression. “No one, black or white, can endure

<sup>22</sup> Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 21; Iris Greenberg to Ruby Doris Smith, letter, April 17, 1964, Box 1, Folder 1, Iris Greenberg Freedom Summer Collection; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, February 15, 1991, Taylor Branch Papers; Newfield, *A Prophetic Minority*, 69; Moses interview Dittmer, 1983; Mississippi’s ‘Freedom Summer’ Reviewed, conference October 30 - November 2, 1979, transcript, Session 5, Folder 5, Mississippi’s ‘Freedom Summer’ Reviewed Collection.

<sup>23</sup> Moses interview Carson, 1982; Semi-Introspective,” anonymous position paper, Box 6, Folder 6, Ella Baker Papers; Roy Shields, “Overall Report, Southwest Georgia,” February, 1965, Files #0344-0349, Reel 19, Series VIII, Research Department, and Hunter R. Morey, “Cross Roads in COFO,” report, December 3, 1964, File #1050, Reel 42, Series XVII, Other Organizations, SNCC Papers; Dittmer, *Local People*, 327; O’Reilly, “*Racial Matters*,” 75-76; Belfrage, *Freedom Summer*, xvi; King, *Freedom Song*, 178; Charles Scattergood, interview by Robert Wright, July 2, 1970, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University; Carson, *In Struggle*, 149; Eugene Turitz, interview by KZSU Radio Station Stanford University, 1965, transcript, KZSU Project South Interview Collection, Microfiche 2479 (E), Library of Congress; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 247-248.

<sup>24</sup> Dennis Sweeney was a close friend of Moses. He and Dona Richards were two of only five witnesses at Sweeney’s wedding with SNCC-worker Mary King in late 1964. In her memoir King notes how Sweeney carried on an “unusual rapport” with Moses. Within a year King and Sweeney divorced due to Sweeney’s increasing emotional breakdowns following his time in Mississippi. At a 1989 Freedom Summer reunion, one participant said, Moses “spoke of Dennis [Sweeney] as someone whom the Movement had failed. He spoke with such caring.” (King, *Freedom Song*, 511, 515; Chafe, *Never Stop Running*, 453; Pam Chude Allen, “Bibliography: The Mississippi Summer Project,” in *Freedom Is A Constant Struggle*, 518)

<sup>25</sup> Mendy Samstein, “The Murder of a Community,” *The Student Voice* 5, no. 22 (September 23, 1964): 2-3, in *The Student Voice*, ed. Carson, 192-193; Chafe, *Never Stop Running*, 453; Juan Williams, *My Soul Looks Back in Wonder: Voices of the Civil Rights Experience* (New York: Sterling Publishing, 2004), 130-133. For more on the psychological effects of Freedom Summer on the volunteers, see Doug McAdam’s *Freedom Summer*, and for the impact on Carmichael see his autobiography *Ready for Revolution*.

what Bob has without becoming at least as bitter as he,” one colleague told *The Village Voice*. “That is the nature of Mississippi.” As Director he could not escape dealing with death and destruction in the fall either. He visited Andrew Goodman’s parents, investigated the McComb bombings, and visited workers in Natchez, where police played Russian roulette with one. “I remember watching the changes in Bob,” Connie Curry related in the mid-seventies. “[I]t broke his heart...he used to get hurt everytime anybody would look mean at him, literally [so] you could imagine that kind of sensitivity in Mississippi where people wanted to kill him.”<sup>26</sup>

The summer’s reaffirmation that white lives were more valuable than black ones spurred Moses’s pessimistic analysis of American society. During a *National Guardian*-dinner he called the Neshoba-killings “the most political murder that has happened in this country” because they raised “basic questions that the society and the national administration are not prepared to answer.” In April 1965 he similarly decried the lack of interest in the Alcorn students whose bodies were found during the Chaney/Schwerner/Goodman-search: “Nobody knows about them. And nobody asks why did that grand jury let [their killers] off...on the same day that they indicted [those who] killed the other three.” The state District Court nonetheless dismissed the latter’s indictments (until their reinstatement in 1967) because Southern juries were called by the same local authorities now on trial. Linking this to national indifference, Moses developed what he called his “murderers’ jury”-theory: just as the prejudiced jury could not convict the racist sheriff, society at large could not condemn itself for its own indifference. National indifference, he argued, occurred because the “country refuses to look at Mississippi...as like them.” He referred to a picture of the trial in *Life* where the suspects were “laughing...as though they were morally idiots.” Society accordingly saw them “as people who are in no way like most Americans,” and “therefore they analyze the problem wrongly [and] look for wrong solutions.” This “problem is so deep,” he sighed, that “all you can do is raise these questions.”<sup>27</sup>

Moses groped for direction by revisiting Albert Camus and his belief that if men could give history no meaning then “they could always act so their own lives have one.” Blacks needed to determine their own objectives by continuing to build parallel institutions, even if it entailed staying outside the ‘system’ forever. “Why can’t we set up our own schools?” he pondered, because “when you come right down to it, why integrate their schools?...Many of the Negroes can learn in it, but what can they do with it? What they really need to learn is how to be organized to work on the society to change it.” He even contemplated establishing a “shadow government” because, he told *Pacific Scene* in February 1965, “what is the government? Who sets it up? The people set it up...Why can’t we set up our own government? So that in 1967, if we get organized enough between now and then, we can set up our own government and declare the other one no good.” Such dramatizations of his belief in grassroots leadership—bordering on nationalism—betrayed Moses’ pessimism. Sparse in his expressions as always, he later appraised the period simply as “It wasn’t a happy time.”<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, 15 February, 1991, Taylor Branch Papers; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 420; Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 435-436; Newfield, “Moses in Mississippi,” *The Village Voice*, December 3, 1964; Moses interview Dittmer, 1983; Raines, *My Soul Is Rested*, 107-108; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 228.

<sup>27</sup> Bob Moses, “Speech at *National Guardian* dinner November 24, 1964,” transcript, File #0810, Reel 59, Series III, Other Organizations, Washington Office, SNCC Papers; Bob Moses, “Questions Raised By Moses,” April, 1965, in *Come Sit At the Welcome Table*, ed. Bond and Lewis, 722-724; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Blackside, Inc., May 19, 1986, for *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, July 30, 1984, Taylor Branch Papers.

<sup>28</sup> Newfield, “Moses in Mississippi,” *The Village Voice*, December 3, 1964; Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 162; “Moses in Mississippi Raises Some Universal Questions,” *Pacific Scene*, February 3, 1965; Dittmer, *Local People*, 325-327; Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 435-436; Julia Cass, “The Moses Factor,” *Mother Jones*, May/June 2002, <http://motherjones.com/politics/2002/05/moses-factor> (accessed May 12, 2008). Newfield noted that during his December 1964 interview with Moses for *The Village Voice*, the latter had Camus’ *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death* with him. The

Due to its growth, lack of funds, and the severity of workers' conditions, SNCC could not look after its burned-out members as before. To flee Movement strains—and the volunteers—many looked outside Mississippi and the South to regain their focus, but most never returned. Veterans like Hollis Watkins, Sam Block, Charles Sherrod, and Dave Dennis resumed their studies. Others traded Mississippi for Alabama. Stokely Carmichael directed a project in Lowndes County, where SNCC worked with locals to build an independent political party, the all-black Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO). Its symbol was a snarling black panther. But most SNCC-workers moved North. By late 1966 only a third of SNCC worked in the rural South; the rest could be found in Atlanta and in Northern cities<sup>29, 30</sup>

Others mentally leaped across the globe for inspiration. A growing number of workers tapped into the nationalist philosophies that had always been an undercurrent in SNCC. After 1963 workers increasingly read Frantz Fanon, accepted rapprochements with Malcolm X, and forged Pan-African connections. Kenya's leader Oginga Odinga's visit to the Atlanta office in December 1963 accelerated this interest in Africa. "Black people at that time had a need to get together by themselves and I think that has to be analyzed in terms of a worldwide perspective," Moses explained in 1982, because "why would you expect that what is sweeping around the rest of the world should not also sweep through this country?" The same trend occurred in organizations like CORE, as well as in SNCC-projects that had not experienced a massive influx of whites. In Arkansas for example, Ben Grinage replaced Bill Hansen as Director because its workers felt that blacks needed to be in leadership positions. Even in Georgia, Charles Sherrod's insistence on interracialism had promoted "heated feelings" from the start<sup>31</sup>. When Sherrod left the Project in 1965, his successor Don Harris recalled, whites "drifted out and we just didn't take any others in." Interest in nationalism was a natural outgrowth of workers' experiences in the South, but in the 1964-1965 winter it also provided a welcome diversion. Blacks "began to look for

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quote "if after all, men cannot always make history have a meaning, they can always act so that their own lives have one" is found on page 106 (Albert Camus, *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death* (New York: Knopf, 1961), 106).

<sup>29</sup> The surge in race riots had demonstrated that economic exploitation needed to be addressed in the urban centers where racist political and economic policies were made. Even Moses, citing an American Medical Society report as evidence, encouraged his colleagues in April 1965 to organize Northern blacks along their Southern model for grassroots leadership as an effective means to "channel off frustrations and tensions that make people act violently." In the mid-1960s to early 1970s, however, SNCC-workers were generally unable to duplicate their southern grassroots model in the North. This had less to do with the model itself than the way in which it was executed. Northern cities consisted of different communities than the Southern rural areas: their scale was much larger and blacks were already integrated into the power structure. As such they required much more time for developing contacts, and research in finding out what the power relations in each neighborhood were, what their economic history, who owned what, who could workers rely on in case of trouble, etc. But most SNCC-workers in the North—many of whom were militant black Northerners who had only recently joined SNCC—were not as wedded in these types of methods as the old SNCC-veterans had been. They thus were unwilling to take the time to study so they could, as one such worker said, give locals "the concretizing day to day, hardcore, unglamorous experience of what it is like to go from point a to point b." Instead they used the flamboyant rhetoric and tactics they knew from their experiences with black nationalism and self-defense, which divided black communities, inhibited fundraising, and spurred the organization's decline until it disappeared in the early 1970s. (Alabama SNCC Workshop, April 21-23, 1965, minutes, Box 1, Folder 3, Mary King Papers; Bob Moses, "Questions Raised By Moses," April, 1965, in *Come Sit At the Welcome Table*, ed. Bond and Lewis, 722-724; Polletta, *Strategy and Identity in 1960's Black Protest*, 278-281; Julian Bond, interview by author, Washington DC, October 27, 2008; Carson, *In Struggle*, 215-303.)

<sup>30</sup> Hogan, *Many Minds, Many Hearts*, 230; Dittmer, *Local People*, 324-327; Polletta, *Strategy and Identity in 1960's Black Protest*, 278-281. For more on the LCOF, see Hasan Kwame Jeffries' *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt* (New York: New York University Press, 2009) and chapter 20 of Stokely Carmichael's *Ready for Revolution*.

<sup>31</sup> Especially from as early as 1963 SNCC-reports noted that as a consequence of Sherrod's insistence on interracialism "all of the Negro guys left Albany...to a place where they would be used creatively...Because of the controls exercised over the project by [Sherrod] such was not possible in the SW Georgia Area." ("Southwest Georgia," report, 1963, File #1016, Reel 9, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers)

ideologies in Africa, Cuba, China," Clayborne Carson reflected in 1979, "rather than [learning from] what we had just experienced."<sup>32</sup>

A SNCC-delegation's trip to Africa between September 11 and October 4, 1964, spurred such identifications. Guinean President Sekou Toure had asked Harry Belafonte to invite a group of SNCC-workers to discuss organizing techniques with Guinean youths. But the question *which* workers should go worsened internal fissures. Should those with the highest "degree of sophistication" go to best fulfill the trip's political purposes, or those who most deserved a break? And what about uneducated Mississippians? SNCC had an obligation to them, Moses reminded his colleagues. How could it argue in Atlantic City that sharecroppers were equal to professionals and now exclude them in favor of intellectuals? When Forman announced that he, John Lewis, and Courtland Cox had acted as a committee (albeit with a mandate from a small staff meeting at Tougaloo) that selected himself, Lewis, Julian Bond, Ruby Doris Smith, and project representatives of Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi (Prathia Hall, Don Harris, and Moses and Dona Richards), other workers angrily questioned this selection process, as well as the fact that this was to be an all-black group. Moses insisted that he and Richards would go with their own money so that locals could take their spots. Eventually SNCC agreed to include Fannie Lou Hamer, Matthew Jones, and Bill Hansen. Nevertheless, the argument left bad feelings all round<sup>33</sup>. Moses later called the trip a "mistake" that diverted from the "immediate concentration on the transition back to normal."<sup>34</sup>

Once in Guinea the workers quickly forgot their troubles. They stayed in President Toure's private seaside villas, dined in his Palace, and attended front-row performances of his dancing crew. They witnessed the opening of a stadium and visited a match factory, a printing plant, and markets in Conakry. With the President, his advisors, and students they discussed social change and read socialist literature. Despite sickness, Moses enjoyed the experience. He especially marveled at the tropical vegetation and Hamer's discovery of a new world. "She didn't speak a word of French," he smiled, but "she would just grab people and talk to them and talk to them." Watching Guinea's poverty gave Moses an appreciation "of the struggle of the Guinean people" in the wake of its decolonization from France in 1958. For all it was a revelation to see blacks, in Hamer's words, "doing everything that I was used to seeing white people do." The delegation, Dona Richards wrote afterwards, "felt a kind of belonging that most of us had never felt in [America]." News distributed by the U.S. government on African-Americans increased skepticism about their homeland. When Guineans showed Moses a picture of himself sitting on a counter with a white man to show "how the South had progressed in integration," Hamer recalled, he got "very angry." When he returned to Africa in 1965 and saw an article in the US government magazine *Topic* that described how he

<sup>32</sup> Moses interview Carson, 1982; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Anne Romaine, September 1966/November 14, 1987, Anne Romaine Papers; King, *Freedom Song*, 165-170; Robnett, *How Long? How Long?* 174; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 480; Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 440; Malcolm X to James Forman, July 31, 1963, File #0657, Reel 7, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers; Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 70, 162-163; Mississippi's 'Freedom Summer' Reviewed, conference October 30 - November 2, 1979, transcript, Session 2, Folder 3, Mississippi's 'Freedom Summer' Reviewed Collection.

<sup>33</sup> This is especially pertinent in view of the structure debate that soon erupted in SNCC. For example, several workers remained angry, leaving others to question their work ethic. "Most people complaining," one told the Executive Committee, "are not doing the job anyway." (SNCC Executive Committee Meeting, September 4, 1964, minutes, Box 1, Folder 3, Mary King Papers)

<sup>34</sup> Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 411; SNCC Executive Committee Meeting, September 4, 1964, minutes, Box 1, Folder 3, Mary King Papers; Lewis and D'Orso, *Walking with the Wind*, 293; Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 480-481; Fleming, *Soon We Will Not Cry*, 145; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, February 15, 1991, Taylor Branch Papers; Moses interview Carson, 1982. In the Carson-interview Moses stated that he felt that SNCC either should have been postponed the trip or "sent other people," like those who could take photographs and do tape recordings and thereby could have made a real "cultural impact" on SNCC. Forman agreed in hindsight as well: "It took away many people who should have helped to steer the organization in the period of transition from summer into fall. Instead...we should have had a long retreat for ourselves and others. People were tired. But we did not think three weeks would make such a difference." (Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 427)



“had won representation for black Mississippians” in Atlantic City, Moses lost his last shred of confidence in the government.<sup>35</sup>

To counter this, Moses recalled that President Toure advised the SNCC-workers to “hold onto your resources and develop your people.” Other Guineans repeated this message, which strengthened SNCC’s interest in Pan-Africanism. Ruby Doris Smith contemplated establishing worldwide Friends of SNCC-groups, and James Forman dreamed of creating an African Bureau. In September 1965 Richards asked SNCC to initiate an Africa Project, which included a library, pamphlets explaining African liberation movements, and a conference. It was high time, she felt, to “expand our borrowed cry of ‘ONE MAN, ONE VOTE’ to ‘SELF-DETERMINATION and DIGNITY, throughout the world!!!’”<sup>36</sup>

The most pertinent advice President Toure gave to Forman encouraged the latter’s views on organizational leadership: “[C]areful attention must be given to the selection of leaders because the people judge an organization by them.” In his autobiography,<sup>37</sup> Forman likewise argued that “an organization that is seeking revolution...cannot afford weak or vacillating leadership.” An October emergency meeting in Atlanta to discuss the ‘freedom force,’ for which the delegation returned home early, convinced him that SNCC’s adoption of a more centralized structure could not wait. Some 85 volunteers wanted to join SNCC permanently. This would double SNCC’s size. Between 1961 and spring 1964 paid staff had fluctuated between 20 and 130, including about 20 whites, but it was now set to reach almost 200, of whom nearly half would be white. Because this would drastically altered SNCC’s racial, geographical, and class composition, most workers, particularly Forman, rejected the plan. But with no clear SNCC-structure their opposition could not be translated into binding mandates. After all, workers asked, when was one actually on ‘staff’? If one was on the payroll? Or were criteria like the willingness to work or amount of time spent in the field more important? Who decided which workers could stay? Project directors? Did Forman’s resistance imply that he wanted the Atlanta office to determine what happened in the field? *Were* there any criteria for hiring or firing staff? *Could* staff even be fired?<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 406-410; Julian Bond, interview by author, Washington DC, October 27, 2008; Moses interview Carson, 1982; Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 481-482; Fleming, *Soon We Will Not Cry*, 145-148; Lee, *For Freedom’s Sake*, 103-107; Hayes, *I Used the Term ‘Negro’ and I Was Firmly Corrected*, 225-226; Dona Richards “Re: SNCC African Project,” memorandum, August 1965, Box 2, Folder 11, Howard Zinn Papers; Fannie Lou Hamer, interviews by Neil McMillen, April 14, 1972/January 25, 1973, transcripts, Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi Collection, University of Southern Mississippi; Hammerback and Jensen, “Working in ‘Quiet Places,’” 11.

<sup>36</sup> Julian Bond, interview by author, Washington DC, October 27, 2008; Hayes, *I Used the Term ‘Negro’ and I Was Firmly Corrected*, 225-226; Dona Richards, “Re: SNCC African Project,” memorandum, August 1965, Box 2, Folder 11, Howard Zinn Papers; Murphree, *The Selling of Civil Rights*, 130-131; Richards, “Report on the beginnings of the African project,” memorandum, no date, Box 6, Folder 10, Ella Baker Papers; File #0183, Reel 1, Series I, Chairman Files John Lewis, SNCC Papers; Fanon Che Wilkins, “The Making of Black Internationalists: SNCC and Africa Before the Launching of Black Power, 1960-1965,” *Journal of African American History*, 92.4 (Fall 2007): 468; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 411; Fleming, *Soon We Will Not Cry*, 148. The trip to Guinea motivated Dona Richards’ desires for the African Project. Guinean students, she wrote, exuded an unmistakable pride in their cultural heritage, whereas President Johnson deliberately stymied blacks’ self-worth: “Johnson is now trying to tell us that our family structure is the cause of our exploitation and what we need is to have a father like his. The result of this propaganda...is that we lose what little pride we had in ourselves as Negroes.” Yet “through identification with the African heritage we can...fight Johnson’s plan.” The African Project, she reasoned, could help “broaden the political concerns of the overall SNCC activity and to make the long overdue link between the struggle for self-determination of black peoples abroad and the struggle of black people in the United States against exploitation.”

<sup>37</sup> In his 1972 autobiography Forman’s interpretation of 1964 events, particularly the October and November Waveland meetings, seem influenced by his late 1960s black nationalist perspective. Wesley Hogan has argued convincingly that in his autobiography Forman gave “an orderly trajectory” to events and his own actions that generally “did not exist” at the time and rather provided an “ex post facto...rationale for his centralizing project.” (See Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 211-212)

<sup>38</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 319-320; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 370; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*,



The question clearly involved more than providing a satisfactory context for the volunteers. “How does one determine who the good people are, and who the good people are who will decide who the good people are?” Moses philosophically summarized the issue at the meeting—expressions which Forman later termed “vague hang-ups” over power questions that were irrelevant for the pragmatic-minded field workers. Rather than apply strict administrative criteria, Moses argued, the volunteer-question should be determined flexibly. The staff should be expanded “a few at a time” in thorough deliberations with project directors based on careful consideration of “the color question, the sophistication of the volunteer, [and] possible fall-out” in the projects. Forman pleaded for the maintenance of the ‘freedom force.’ He later wrote he was defeated in a vote, although historian Wesley Hogan has observed that minutes of the meeting do not mention a vote and several workers recalled simply receiving a memo with the names of the volunteers who remained, implying that the issue was indeed resolved locally.<sup>39</sup>

The meeting’s other topic, approval of the Black Belt Project, sharpened the debate over structure. Its supporters were mostly cosmopolitan-educated workers like James Forman, Stokely Carmichael, and Mendy Samstein. Despite its national angle, Moses had supported it too when it came under discussion at a September Executive Committing. He had emphasized Southwide speaking tours for MFDP-members, residential Freedom Schools, libraries run by locals, and literacy programs as the Project’s greatest aims—unlike Forman’s stress on “political underrepresentation.” But now Moses stayed silent. “[I]t was useless to try and go into another student project like we had,” he explained in 1983, “because of the problems with the staff...[W]e just couldn’t handle that.” Several SNCC-workers, particularly Lawrence Guyot and Frank Smith, demanded to know “who made [the] decision” to have the project, implying that its supporters, particularly Forman, wanted to impose a top-down style of management. Supporters in turn asked why SNCC’s “leadership is not fighting for this proposal. Leadership has to fight for what it wants. Who is Frank Smith, to try and sabotage this program?” This was especially pertinent because Smith had worked for SNCC since 1962 but was not an ‘official’ staff member. Guyot left the meeting angry. The Project was never discussed again.<sup>40</sup>

Forman judged the failure to adopt the Project as “a crucial defeat. There are moments in history when an idea is ripe for implementation and can change the destiny of many.” This interpretation, however, ignored the valid points raised against it. Several questioned whether SNCC had the “resources, money, and people” and, if so, how to distribute them equally. Others argued that SNCC should first complete its responsibilities to its existing programs before expanding. “Are we interested in building a political empire for SNCC, or in building local leadership?” Smith retorted, “[These] two types of organizations are not compatible. We must discuss what SNCC is.” Guyot opposed because the Project meant fewer resources for Mississippi. Workers from Arkansas, Alabama, and Georgia supported him; they already felt, as one Arkansas worker complained in January 1964, that they were “at the bottom of [SNCC’s] list.” Freedom Summer had only exacerbated that situation. According to John Lewis workers from other states had fought Moses’ plan to shift headquarters to Greenwood “like I don’t know what” because they feared this eclipsed resources for their projects. As one disgruntled at the June meeting: “We’ve got beatings and murders in Arkansas, too, you know.” They were proven right. Southwest Georgia for instance had only two cars whereas several Mississippi projects had two each during the Summer. This “was unintentional [but] inescapable,” Julian Bond explained in 2008, because “Mississippi *demand*ed this kind of effort.”<sup>41</sup>

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410, 413, 420-426; Fleming, *Soon We Will Not Cry*, 149; SNCC Staff Meeting October 11, 1964, minutes, File #1016-1021, Reel 3, Series III, Staff Meetings, SNCC Papers.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 367; “Black Belt Program,” memoranda, Files #0779-0782, Reel 20, Series VIII, Research Department, SNCC Papers; Meeting SNCC Executive Committee, September 4, 1964, minutes, Box 1, Folder 3, Mary King Papers; Moses interview Carson, 1982; Carson, *In Struggle*, 138-139; Dittmer, *Local People*, 318-319; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 417-418.

<sup>41</sup> Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 417-418; SNCC Staff Meeting October 11, 1964, minutes, File #1016-

Field workers were becoming increasingly concerned that SNCC headquarters was acting in a high-handed and arbitrary way. Atlanta distributed resources unfairly, they complained. “If you were new to the organization, and you didn’t know people,” one complained, “what then?” No-one but Forman knew how much money came in and how and why it was spent, whereas field workers had to account for all their spending. “We are broke and hungry,” one wrote headquarters upset. “I have been spending all my subsistence money for the last seven weeks on nothing but needs in the field, so if we ever send a dollar or fifty cents of SNCC-money for food, don’t give us no shit!” The problems increased after Freedom Summer. Now that the staff had doubled SNCC had to raise \$30,000 in salaries per month next to general expenses, while its income was declining. Understandably, headquarters wanted to check where money went, especially when they heard of workers who just ‘sat around’ waiting for locals to initiate something or who squandered resources by, for example, wrecking cars when speeding. Moreover, the question which workers could be fired meant that the field staff had to accept office workers’ interpretation of what “work” entailed<sup>42,43</sup>

Many field workers, mostly Northerners, rebelled against Forman’s push for bureaucratization. If SNCC created new, viable programs, they argued, discipline problems would automatically diminish. As always, a workable structure would naturally emerge from that. Another group of field workers, generally Southern blacks, used the situation to demand a *more* rigid structure. The lack of top-down guidelines accelerated local offices’ inefficiency. “You have stood us up [repeatedly],” one worker wrote the Jackson office annoyed, “we are sick and tired of [this].” Eventually they chose “to simply ignore Jackson.” Moreover, workers who stole, drank, or otherwise misbehaved hampered their projects. “Why [are people] left in projects long after their project directors have complained and complained about them?” one wondered annoyed. For them discussions on structure took precedence over programs. They figured, one explained, “that if a structure were there, then these little frustrations would be solved and they could run a program.” As Howard Zinn put it in November 1964, SNCC-workers were caught in a vicious circle that allowed for leaving “decisions to a few people at the top, or to individuals in the field acting on their own, in other words, both too much localism and too much dictation.”<sup>44</sup>

SNCC was “at a crossroads” again, Moses stated in 1984. “People began to question what happened within [SNCC]. And once that was raised...that process had to [be gone] through.” He and James Forman therefore arranged a retreat in Waveland, Mississippi, between November 6-12, 1964, where a fluctuating staff of 80-140 discussed structure and program proposals in workshops and through

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1021, and SNCC Executive Committee Meeting, June 9-11, 1964, minutes, Files #0975-0992, Reel 3, Series III, Staff Meetings, SNCC Papers; Arkansas Field Report, January 12, 1964, Box 1, Folder 1, Iris Greenberg Freedom Summer Collection; Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 152-153, 211-212; John Perdew, “Southwest Georgia—Problems and Solutions,” report, December 23, 1963, Box 2, Folder 9, Howard Zinn Papers; James Forman, memorandum, no date (likely December 1964), Box 8, Folder 1, Ella Baker Papers; Lewis and D’Orso, *Walking with the Wind*, 301; Julian Bond, interview by author, Washington DC, October 27, 2008.

<sup>42</sup> For example, because photography was not considered ‘revolutionary,’ office workers questioned whether they should finance such projects, or ‘floating’ workers who hopped from project to project before having established any concrete results. (SNCC Staff Institute, May 10-15, 1965, minutes, Box 3, Folder 4, Mary King Papers)

<sup>43</sup> Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 77-78, 247-248; Carson, *In Struggle*, 133, 139; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 202-203; Willie Ricks, Field Report, March 15, 1964, File #0496, Reel 7, Series IV, Executive Secretary Files James Forman, SNCC Papers; James Forman, memorandum, no date (likely December 1964), Box 8, Folder 1, Ella Baker Papers; SNCC Staff Institute, May 10-15, 1965, minutes, Box 3, Folder 4, Mary King Papers.

<sup>44</sup> Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 77, 293-294; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 202, 216-217; Barbara Schwartzbaum, letter, no date, Files #0670-0671, Reel 70, Appendix A: MFDP Papers, SNCC Papers; John Bradford to Jackson office, letter, no date, and Muriel Tillinghast and Stokely Carmichael, memorandum, no date, and Mary Brumder, letter, no date, Box 1, Folder 6, Samuel Walker Papers; Howard Zinn, “Some Suggestions in Answer to Questions Raised by the ‘Memo,’ to Planners of the Staff meeting,” position paper, no date (likely early November 1964), Box 2, Folder 11, Howard Zinn Papers; Polletta, *Strategy and Identity in 1960’s Black Protest*, 188-189.

anonymous ‘position papers.’ But the two men had different expectations. Moses appreciated the papers as “an experiment in democracy” because it prevented (dis)agreements based on personality. The workshops also guaranteed participatory democracy: small groups discussed a single issue and afterwards presented their conclusions for discussion with the entire group. SNCC had always worked this way, but now, he recounted, “there’s this fear that there’s something going on that you’re missing.” Besides goodwill, patience was lacking. Forman wanted concrete results and wanted them *now*. He traveled “from workshop to workshop,” Moses said, “He couldn’t...discipline himself to accept the process [and get] in one area of discussion.” Forman repetitively asked Moses “if he couldn’t help to move things along.” When the latter replied that “things will start working out in a while,” Forman became increasingly frustrated. Moses later complained that Forman acted as “a dominant personality.”<sup>45</sup>

Forman opened the meeting by stating that it was “imperative” for SNCC to adopt a centralized structure, with a coordinating committee consisting of the whole staff (a recognition of field workers’ desire for input) that decided policy three times a year through voting, and a Program Secretary who oversaw the implementation of programs in the field. Some SNCC-workers had already proposed this structure in June, but Forman’s tactic of opening a meeting with a formal speech and his call to let programs flow from structure ignored SNCC’s normal way of proceeding. “Where’s our dialogue?” grumbled some. When they proceeded to discuss programs, Forman pressed for his structure plan each day and tried to force a vote on it, even when attendance fell to fifty percent of the staff members. On the fourth day he finally succeeded in moving the discussion to structure.<sup>46</sup>

Moses opposed Forman only implicitly in his position paper. “We are on a boat in the middle of the ocean. It has to be rebuilt in order to stay afloat,” he wrote, but it “also has to stay afloat in order to be rebuilt. Our problem is like that. Since we are out on the ocean we have to do it ourselves.” Moses was referring to Austrian philosopher Otto Neurath’s metaphor about a scientist in a leaking boat who tried to assemble a precise language of science from the ocean of ordinary language around him to prevent it from sinking. Yet he could not dock his boat to get his language of science in order because the ocean’s ordinary language was constantly rebuilt. SNCC, Moses implied, should not focus too much on precise language—a specific structure or a particular ideology—because they were forever bound by the ordinary language—the continuously altering social contexts in which SNCC-workers operated—from which it had to evolve. SNCC had to be flexible. Like the scientist who could not rebuild his boat by using language that was no longer used or had proven inadequate, SNCC should not look to models from the past (its own or someone else’s) but had to find its own answers suited for that moment in time because the urgency of staying afloat meant it simultaneously had to act.<sup>47</sup>

Only this kind of flexible, pragmatic approach could sustain that contradiction, Moses went on. SNCC should engage in self-evaluation, but not “be hung-up” over questions like decision-making. Just as it was impossible to discover the function of an elephant by touching it in the dark—those touching its trunk identified it is a water pipe while others, touching its ears, as a fan—he wrote, SNCC could not define its function by pinpointing individual parts. Instead of discussing what SNCC *is*, they should try to “reach wider agreement on how to use it.” After all, it was better to have a worker who did not know what SNCC was but knew how to use it to run a Freedom Day than vice versa. Structures did not have to

<sup>45</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by Joe Sinsheimer, December 5, 1984, Taylor Branch Papers; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 433, 435; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 198; Moses, “Commentary,” in *We Shall Overcome*, ed. Albert and Hoffman, 71-72.

<sup>46</sup> SNCC Meeting at Waveland, November 6-12, 1964, minutes, Files #0935-0957, Reel 11, Series V, SNCC Conferences, and SNCC Executive Committee Meeting, June 9-11, 1964, minutes Files #0975-0992, Reel 3, Series III, Staff Meetings, SNCC Papers; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 199-202, 216, 273-276, 280-282.

<sup>47</sup> Bob Moses, position paper, November 1964, Box 1, Folder 2, Stuart Ewen Papers; Carson, *In Struggle*, 141; Bob Moses and Victoria Gray, “Civil Rights as Theological Drama” (Conference on Lived Theology and Civil Courage, 2003), transcript, [http://www.livedtheology.org/colt\\_03\\_gray\\_moses.html](http://www.livedtheology.org/colt_03_gray_moses.html) (accessed January 23, 2009); Moses, “Commentary,” in *We Shall Overcome*, ed. Albert and Hoffman, 71-72; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 201.

be explicit to be used effectively: “Certain logical structures are so everywhere that almost nobody can see them,” but “you can use them without knowing what they are and feel fine.” He proposed to divide SNCC’s conundrums in three areas: ‘crucial’ problems “at the center of our work;” ‘every-day problems on the edge;’ and the ‘working problems’ in between. ‘Crucial’ problems, like the months-long debates over the Summer Project, should be dealt with through patience and everyone’s input. But because the “staff cannot sit in continuous session,” ‘working problems’ should be circulated among all, with discussion of their solutions limited to “staff who are interested...When it’s over they disband.” ‘Every-day problems’ could be solved “immediately by the person responsible in [a] forum with himself or whoever.” Essentially Moses proposed to continue the intangible decentralized structure he had always applied in Mississippi. To underscore his words, he ended with a warning from philosopher Alfred Whitehead: “The fixed man for the fixed duty is a public danger.”<sup>48</sup>

Despite his effort at anonymity, Moses’ erudition betrayed his identity and thereby sharpened the conflict with Forman. As Howard Zinn said in 1986: “No-one can tell me that when Jim Forman came across that metaphor he didn’t know who wrote it. We all deal with metaphors, but some deal with them more than others.” Forman indeed counterattacked in his opening speech. Referring to “someone” comparing SNCC to a boat, Moses recalled, he said: “I don’t like the metaphor. I think we don’t want to say that it’s an ocean. We need to get some direction in it and say that our boat is on a river, that it’s moving someplace.” He even stated that SNCC was “on a river of *no return*,” meaning that it was committed to a certain direction and could not be hamstrung on questions like structure; it had to adopt one so it could fulfill that direction. “The longer we take to deal with this question, the longer we fail to give the kind of service to the people that we could,” he stressed. Thus both men were calling for an end to theoretical debates; but whereas Moses argued that structure was irrelevant, Forman insisted that structure was indispensable.<sup>49</sup>

Forman later wrote that he then realized that SNCC was in “a factional fight” between those wanting a decentralized structure—the ‘Moses-faction’—and those who wanted a tight structure—the ‘Forman-faction.’ The latter, the ‘hardliners,’ indiscriminately termed the former ‘floaters’ or the ‘Freedom High’ faction, although they did not, in fact, constitute a coherent group. Some, like Moses, wanted a loose structure because their field experience had shown it was the only viable approach for grassroots leadership and survival. Others, mostly the ‘Christian idealists’ from SNCC’s early days, wanted it on principle; if equality were unattainable in society at large, then they should at least practice it among themselves. Not a few, generally Northern whites, elevated personal freedom above all else. Becoming “high on freedom,” they combined Moses’ existentialist philosophy with the attitude from the spiritual “Go where the Spirit says ‘Go.’” Highly articulate, this group was disproportionately vocal, leaving many Southern-born ‘hardliners’ convinced that Northerners wanted to take over ‘their’ SNCC through over-intellectual analyses about power and leadership. Even though many ‘floaters’ were Northern blacks just looking for a meaningful program, ‘hardliners’ characterized everyone “at Waveland who don’t want structure [as] white, intellectuals, and not doing a specific job,” as one wrote in February. Forman likewise depicted them as a “small elitist core of self-perpetuating organizers.” ‘Freedom High’ became a derogatory term for anyone engaged in “rambling and inconclusive discussion which will leave us all spiritually purged but still in organizational chaos.”<sup>50</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Bob Moses, position paper, November 1964, Box 1, Folder 2, Stuart Ewen Papers. See also Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 217. The exact quote by Alfred Whitehead is: “The fixed person for the fixed duties who in older societies was such a godsend, in future will be a public danger.” (See “Epilogue: The Training of Professionals” in Alfred North Whitehead’s *Science and the Modern World* (1953)).

<sup>49</sup> Moses, “Commentary,” and Zinn, “Commentary,” in *We Shall Overcome*, ed. Albert and Hoffman, 71-72, 78; “Appendix E: James Forman’s Speech at Waveland, November 1964,” in *Many Minds, One Heart*, Hogan, 273-275.

<sup>50</sup> Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 425, 436; Polletta, *Strategy and Identity in 1960’s Black Protest*, 181,

As Wesley Hogan observed, these terminologies—which did not surface until May 1965—did not accurately describe what happened at Waveland<sup>51</sup>. Yet Forman’s analysis has dominated historical discussions of that staff meeting. As one SNCC veteran complained: “[W]hen I read the history books I deduce that I was considered part of a faction at Waveland, the ‘anti-structure’ people. That’s interesting... The point wasn’t whether we were pro- or anti-structure, but rather what kind of structure we needed.” The many memoirs of other SNCC-workers, generally ‘hardliners,’ reinforced these interpretations. Cleveland Sellers for instance described how he interrupted a “secret floater meeting” at which Moses was present. The group’s discussion moved into “abstract, philosophical areas,” so he chastised the “little Bobs”: “Stick with reality!...What we ought to be discussing is strategy and programs. Where are your programs?” John Lewis similarly described them as people unwilling to accept responsibility to “anything other than his or her own spirit.”<sup>52</sup>

‘Floaters’ and ‘hardliners’ thus took aspects of Moses’ ideas to justify their own actions, and thereby contributed to his mythification. Scholars like Emily Stoper and David Chappell described him as an “exponent of anarchist ideas” with “a near pathological aversion” to power, even though he considered both antithetical to effective organizing. As Hogan noted, Moses’ definition of power and how to attain it simply differed from Forman’s. Moses cared deeply about leadership, believing that “the only difference between the leader and the led was a matter of becoming.” He recognized that certain degrees of discipline and organization were necessary, as his stress on screening and his meticulously detailed memoranda indicate. The Waveland-meeting likewise belies Moses’ depiction as an impractical idealist. Although he occasionally drifted into philosophy, overall he provided pragmatic suggestions for discussions, like the need to establish “pilot programs” on economic issues.<sup>53</sup>

Moses therefore always rejected the ‘Freedom High’-interpretation of what he wanted to do. “I don’t want to be called a person who doesn’t want to work,” he grumbled at a February 1965 SNCC-meeting, “I [just] asked what or who do we organize? Do we build a SNCC machine or do we organize people?” In the field, he stated in 2010, SNCC “had a network [and] basis for a structure. But we didn’t have a *theory* about the structure we had. And so it got thrown overboard with the idea well, it’s ‘freedom high’ and people are just going to do whatever they want.” Such labels, he had already reflected earlier, did not accurately describe “what happened in Mississippi.” There, he explained, what took root under SNCC’s influence derived from Amzie Moore’s insights, and “Amzie certainly wouldn’t think of himself either as a floater, a hardliner, [or] Christian idealist.” Such categories were constructed identities intended “to build a basis for the decisions that were being made to structure SNCC.” Neither did he appreciate the term ‘Moses-faction.’ “I don’t think ‘faction’ does justice to what was happening,” he protested in 2010. “I was not, like Jim, trying to actively lead SNCC...It was clear for me, all along, that you couldn’t sit down and think through how to put something like SNCC together [because] SNCC evolved through many twists and turns.”<sup>54</sup>

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183-184; Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 78-79, 270; King, *Freedom Song*, 446-448, 483-485; Mary Varela, “Some Basic Considerations for the Staff Retreat,” position paper, no date, Box 8, Folder 1, Ella Baker Papers. See also files #0062-0066, Reel 3, Series III, Staff Meetings, SNCC Papers.

<sup>51</sup> For example, many ‘loose structurists,’ like Moses and Casey Hayden, were neither newcomers nor representative of a middle-class background. Moreover, no organized groups were present. Historians like Clayborne Carson and Taylor Branch nonetheless speak of a ‘Moses-faction’ and a ‘Forman-faction.’ (Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 212-214, 370-371; Carson, *In Struggle*, 139; Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 480, 506)

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*; Emmie Schrader Adams, “From Africa to Mississippi,” in *Deep In Our Hearts*, Curry et al., 325; Sellers and Terrell, *The River of No Return*, 134-135; Lewis and D’Orso, *Walking with the Wind*, 303; Marsh, *God’s Long Summer*, 169.

<sup>53</sup> Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 106-107; David L. Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 78-80; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 211-212, 370; King, *Freedom Song*, 430-431; SNCC Meeting at Waveland, November 6-12, 1964, minutes, Files #0935-0957, Reel 11, Series V, SNCC Conferences, SNCC Papers.

<sup>54</sup> SNCC Meeting, February 1965, minutes, William Heath Papers; Robert Parris Moses, interview by author, Raleigh, NC,

James Forman also spent time in the field, including in Monroe, Danville, Greenwood, and Albany. But, Wesley Hogan explained, he never remained in the field long enough to obtain the “experientially grounded insight” of workers like Moses. What mattered for Forman’s job was efficient administration and the projection of SNCC to donors, government officials, and the general public. This orientation logically influenced his perception of what was needed to produce social change. “There is no social revolution which can survive without organization,” he argued in 1962, “It may *arise* spontaneously, but it cannot survive unless it is encouraged.”<sup>55</sup>

At Waveland Forman reiterated Jim Monson’s point that a designated spokesman could improve SNCC’s troubled fundraising. He pressured Moses, but the latter predictably replied that he “was not available for such a projection.” Moses recognized the need for fundraising—in meetings he proposed multiple ideas<sup>56</sup>—but overall he lacked alternatives. In hindsight, he felt that workers should have taken “out as many years as was necessary to work to gain money and put that money in a common cause [so] you actually had your own economic base.” But SNCC lacked this expertise and the solutions that were offered were ones “on which I wouldn’t continue to work with SNCC...[P]eople thought that their fundraising [could] buy radical nationalism.” What they failed to understand, he added in 2010, was that “the resources were part of SNCC because of what it was that SNCC stood for; and if they changed what it stood for, the resources would disappear.”<sup>57</sup>

Yet Forman was not merely motivated by office needs. Like Moses, he cared deeply about building leadership, but believed that people learned how to act by participating in a structure. This was not the same as desiring power in itself, although these ideas were easily confused. Some ‘floaters’ dismissed genuine complaints about discipline as attempts to justify dictatorship. Forman’s example spurred such charges. He admitted that he fought hard “for the implementation of my ideas.” Consequently some ‘hardliners’ used that to justify their own power quests. “Too many of our leaders are not seriously concerned about building an organization that is going to be something other than an instrument to enable them to inflate their super-conceited egos,” one complained. Some Southern blacks, Jane Stembridge agreed, “wanted positions, titles, identity, never having had any.” In subsequent years newcomers to SNCC, mostly urban blacks who had been influenced by Malcolm X, stimulated this politicking trend. Combined with the departure of veterans experienced in participatory democracy, this accelerated SNCC’s rift from the Southern rural black population. When Fannie Lou Hamer questioned SNCC’s late 1966 proposal to expel whites from the organization (although only a handful were left), she was dismissed as “no longer relevant.” This departure from rooting SNCC’s organizing in community people, as Charles Payne has demonstrated, played a major role in SNCC’s rapid decline.<sup>58</sup>

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April 15, 2010, and email interview by author, October 25, 2010; Agger, *The Sixties at 40*, 186-187. Furthermore, field workers’ survival still hinged on reliance on each other and leading ‘a faction’ would have jeopardized this.

<sup>55</sup> Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 208-210, 220-221, 365; King, *Freedom Song*, 446-448; SNCC Executive Committee Meeting, September 4, 1964, minutes, Box 1, Folder 3, Mary King Papers. For more on Forman’s activism, see his *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*.

<sup>56</sup> One such idea was collecting “year-end money” which “people have to get rid of for tax purposes,” but overall Moses insisted on slow-based organizing in fundraising as well. When SNCC discussed the need to increase their fundraising and improve the morale of its Northern FOS-office workers (who had not been paid regularly and lacked the skills for setting up a national fundraising apparatus) during the September 4, 1964, SNCC Executive Committee meeting, he for instance advised that “as much time as possible should be given to the question of FOS. It can’t be left over and unsettled.” When the idea to hire a professional fundraiser to assist the FOS-offices was discussed, he insisted that since the person needed “to have different skills” like “coordinate FOS and staff people,” the plea to set a “time limit on reaching a decision” as to whom this person should be resisted. “We’re not doing this right,” he pressed, “Since it is so crucial the time can be taken to go over all the people available and to make a decision.” (SNCC Executive Committee Meeting, September 4, 1964, minutes, Box 1, Folder 3, Mary King Papers).

<sup>57</sup> Moses interview Carson, 1982; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 11, 1983, Taylor Branch Papers; Robert Parris Moses, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 15, 2010.

<sup>58</sup> Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 431; Carson, *In Struggle*, 139; “Semi-Introspective,” anonymous



SNCC's tragedy was that the incompatibilities of Forman's and Moses's views, combined with the clustering of groups around certain personalities that separated workers from their collective experience, led to an "either/or" thinking that before Freedom Summer had been contained. SNCC's success, after all, was based in *both* views. Even Ella Baker recognized this: "Moses and his role in Mississippi benefited [from] the fact that you had a Jim Forman who was philosophically developed enough to recognize...that going to people getting money was a form of providing them with an opportunity to develop." This balance could be maintained due to the consensus goal of voter registration. In its absence, SNCC-workers struggled to recreate it, but "the process," Moses lamented in 1984, was "short-circuited because of impatience."<sup>59</sup>

The Waveland-meeting is a case in point. When discussing stealing, Moses approached it as symptomatic of the loss of SNCC's atmosphere of genuine inter-human living. "What bothers me," he said, "is that people steal my time because they don't really talk of themselves, from the center, they talk from the periphery. They steal because there isn't enough time to go around, and the needs of people don't get answered...In our society, we steal whole people's lives away." But 'hardliner' Ed Brown dismissed this as philosophic mumbo-jumbo: he was not interested in "the motivations that cause people to steal...we have got to deal with priorities. If it means that you lock your doors, then you must, but let's get on with real business at hand for the future of the organization." Moses and Brown raised two aspects that each believed were central to SNCC's survival: trust and expediency. But the desire for both prevented the realization of either: for expediency they needed trust in their fellow-workers, but the desire for expediency created *more* distrust because people's voices were curtailed.<sup>60</sup>

SNCC's expansion accelerated this destructive paradox. Between 1961 and 1964, Moses explained in 1984, SNCC underwent a slow, "organic process of growth." It had developed "ways of protecting your creativity [and] sense of community," but Freedom Summer "interrupted that." As Don Harris pointed out, "there was no way to get to know eight hundred people." When the meetings were small, Stokely Carmichael remembered, office workers had "sat in with the field staff and left feeling deeply involved at a frontline level." But now, Harris said, "there were too many people in the field versus too few people in Atlanta operating too inefficiently to adequately deal with everything we were doing." Expansion also occurred at a time when SNCC's political direction was becoming unclear. "Internal democracy," SNCC-scholar Francesca Polletta argued, "became problematic in part because it substituted for a discussion of movement purposes."<sup>61</sup>

Many SNCC-workers became impatient with the ideal of participatory democracy. The length of discussions, for example, spurred frustrations. In the past, Charles McDew recalled, "somebody may have spoken 8 hours, and 7 hours and 53 minutes was utter bullshit, but 7 minutes was good. [Baker] taught us to glean out the 7 minutes." But in such a large group this style of discussion was impractical. Workers began to accept motions because they were "tired of talking," not because they agreed. "It was not democracy because it was the people who could stay awake the longest who became the winners," one later complained. In 1966, for example, John Lewis defeated Stokely Carmichael in a vote for the position of chair, but after his supporters had left the meeting exhausted, another vote was forced that Carmichael won.<sup>62</sup>

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position paper, Box 6, Folder 6, Ella Baker Papers; Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 78, 171, 252; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 368-390.

<sup>59</sup> Jim Kates, email interview by author, May 25, 2009; Ella Baker, interview by John Britton, June 19, 1968, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 211; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Joe Sinsheimer, December 5, 1984, Taylor Branch Papers.

<sup>60</sup> SNCC Meeting at Waveland, November 6-12, 1964, minutes, Files #0935-0957, Reel 11, Series V, SNCC Conferences, SNCC Papers.

<sup>61</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by Joe Sinsheimer, December 5, 1984, Taylor Branch Papers; Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 157, 161; Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 428-429; Polletta, *Strategy and Identity in 1960's Black Protest*, 190-191.

<sup>62</sup> Grant, *Ella Baker*, 137; King, *Freedom Song*, 306; Heather Tobis Booth, email interview by author, November 2009; SNCC Meeting at Waveland, November 6-12, 1964, minutes, Files #0935-0957, Reel 11, Series V, SNCC Conferences,

Another downside of participatory democracy that the post-1964 climate aggravated was that “whoever could articulate the plan best” became the ‘leader.’ These generally were the whites and Northern middle-class blacks like the Howard University group. This spurred resentment of both. Lower-class Southern blacks feared, one wrote, that the former used the Atlanta office to “push grand intellectual schemes about what we will do with the local people.” Race and class accordingly became another stake in the structure-debate, exploited by ‘hardliners’ and ‘floaters’ alike. ‘Hardliners,’ Ed Brown noted in 1967, used the “intimidation” of lower-class blacks to demand voting power for the field staff, whereas ‘floaters’ used it to argue *against* a voting-dominated structure because then a minority could impose their will even more. Consequently, Emily Stoper explained, the inherent tensions within SNCC’s desire to retain its redemptive qualities at a time when its growing nationalist political perspective increasingly determined its direction inevitably enhanced its deadlock. SNCC, Clayborne Carson agreed, crippled itself by obsessing about internal inequities. Simultaneously, racial tensions made constructive discussion near impossible. The oft-repeated suggestion that “whites and blacks should be used according to the functions which they best serve”—that is, each within their own community—foreshadowed the 1966 expulsion of whites. At Waveland working-class blacks still adopted a self-imposed inhibition. Their inability to follow discussions—“I don’t talk ‘cause I don’t understand the words that you-all use!” one shouted—caused most to simply avoid workshops or leave them early.<sup>63</sup>

Overall SNCC-workers still favored its decentralized, consensus-based organizing approach. On the last day, they discussed Forman’s structure proposal and two alternatives. Time constraints ended discussions prematurely, but Mary King recorded afterwards that the meeting reaffirmed that SNCC should not “alter our definition of ourselves for the people who give us money.” Forman later wrote that the discussions collapsed over the question of firing workers. Confusion existed as much on the last day as on the first. Many left out of a sense of futility; even those who stayed could not agree on what was decided on. The only thing everyone recognized was the sad truth of Mendy Samstein’s statement that “we are a lot of different people from different backgrounds. We are not brothers just because we have been put on pay-roll.” In subsequent months, morale and discipline continued to decline. More workers left or abandoned responsibilities for new projects. Tolerance of white workers continued to decrease. “People who were talking to each other stopped [communicating],” Moses reflected in 1993. “The whole spectrum of race relations compressed, broke down, and washed us away.” This led to the remaining SNCC-workers’ becoming increasingly open to Forman’s proposals and created a space, as Wesley Hogan put it, where those “who wanted power took it.”<sup>64</sup>

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SNCC Papers; Agger, *The Sixties at 40*, 206-207; Carson, *In Struggle*, 199-204; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 218. Such incidents, albeit with less far-reaching consequences, occurred in SNCC’s pre-1964 era too, but then its small scale ensured that workers, Carmichael wrote, still left a meeting “with a sense of unity and of participation.” (Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 428-429)

<sup>63</sup> Dorie Ladner, interview by author, Washington DC, November 16, 2011; Ed Brown, interview by Harold O. Lewis, June 30, 1967, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University; Carson, *In Struggle*, 143-145; Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 98-100; Stoper, “The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee: Rise and Fall of a Redemptive Organization,” 17; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 203-207; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 434-435; SNCC Meeting at Waveland, November 6-12, 1964, minutes, Files #0935-0957, Reel 11, Series V, SNCC Conferences, SNCC Papers.

<sup>64</sup> SNCC Meeting at Waveland, November 6-12, 1964, minutes, Files #0935-0957, Reel 11, Series V, SNCC Conferences, and Mary King to John Lewis, letter, January 10, 1965, File #0650, Reel 1, Series I, Chairman Files John Lewis, SNCC Papers; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 213, 216-218, 373; James J. Podesta, “Robert Parris Moses,” *Gale Contemporary Black Biography*, entry posted 2006, <http://www.answers.com/topic/robert-parris-moses> (accessed September 16, 2007); Carson, *In Struggle*, 146, 149.

### 10.3. Robert Parris ‘The Man’

As 1965 approached Moses increasingly struggled with ‘battle fatigue’ and the realization that in this climate he could not contribute anything worthwhile without embracing his leadership role. This he was unwilling to do. He even resigned as COFO-director in December 1964 because his role “was too strong, too central, so that people who did not need to, began to lean on me, to use me as a crutch.” But this did little to change his reputation; Freedom Summer had turned him into a national civil rights leader. *The Reporter* had claimed his “leadership [as] vital” and *The Saturday Evening Post* accompanied its articles with large pictures of him. Mississippi blacks hung such pictures of Moses in their homes, next to images of Jesus<sup>65</sup>. Many volunteers, Sellers recalled, treated Moses as “a cultural hero” and copied his speech and clothing. In letters they lauded him as “someone you read about in novels” and “as great a man as any generation could produce.” Even veteran workers copied his mannerisms, especially his rolling hand as he spoke. “We thought we were smarter if we did that,” Julian Bond laughed in 2008.<sup>66</sup>

Yet Moses’ treatment as “the all-perfect and all-holy and all-wise leader,” John Lewis observed, “made him so uncomfortable he felt like climbing out of his own skin.” When he received a standing ovation at the *National Guardian*-dinner, Moses told the 1,000-strong audience: “This is absurd. You’re acting like you’re part of the establishment.” He left the event “depressed.” James Forman recalled that Moses once complained that no-one ever called him a ‘mother fucker.’ Moses now withdrew increasingly into his Hamilton-observation role. This too was part of his silence during the Black Belt Project discussions, although he told “Forman what he thought in private.” But his “silence created even *more* reverence for him. It was maddening,” John Lewis wrote, “You could see him almost starting to crack under all these pressures.”<sup>67</sup>

For the ‘hardliners,’ Moses’ attitude was incomprehensible. “My position was that you just stand up and say, ‘Mother fucker, fuck you,’ and you’ll be one of the guys then,” Forman later reflected, “But you don’t abdicate leadership.” He blamed the ‘floaters’: “[Moses] was made to feel guilty [primarily by] the middle-class element, who constantly sniped at him about his supposedly excessive influence.” This explanation, however, underrates Moses’ capacity for self-criticism and guilt, as well as the sincerity with which he approached his philosophical entanglements with his leadership position. To Forman’s warnings that if he abdicated leadership “this thing will collapse,” Moses merely retorted: “At what point do you turn over leadership?” He similarly retreated from the secret ‘floater’-meeting after the ‘hardliners’ invasion. “Bob could have won the confrontation if he had wanted to,” Sellers noted, “He was smart enough to tie [us hardliners] into philosophical knots. He didn’t do it because he realized that he would have had to become what he abhorred, a manipulator.”<sup>68</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Even Governor Paul Johnson had a blown-up picture of Moses in his office, as if he personified everything he considered evil in Mississippi. (Moses interview Dittmer, 1983)

<sup>66</sup> Carson, *In Struggle*, 156; Woodley, “It Will Be a Hot Summer in Mississippi,” *The Reporter*, May 21, 1964; Sellers and Terrell, *The River of No Return*, 82-83; Belfrage, *Freedom Summer*, 25, 74; Volunteer to ‘Diane and Susan,’ letter, June 26, 1964, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, University of Southern Mississippi; Julian Bond, interview by author, Washington DC, October 27, 2008; To become “SNCCY,” Julian Bond mocked workers’ deference to informal hierarchies in 1965, one had to use “the Moses two-finger punch,” a “forward jabbing motion of the first two fingers of the right hand, used to punch holes in other people’s arguments” and say things like “what I think is...” but then paraphrase something “you heard Moses and Forman say at lunch yesterday.” (Julian Bond, “How To Be SNCCY,” in *Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary*, ed. Rubin, 52-53. For *The Saturday Evening Post*, see Files #0288-0292, Reel 20, Series VIII, Research Department, SNCC Papers.)

<sup>67</sup> Lewis and D’Orso, *Walking with the Wind*, 239-240, 302, 305; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 419-420; Moses interview Carson, 1982; Carson, *In Struggle*, 138-140; Dittmer, *Local People*, 318-319; Hammerback and Jensen, “Working in ‘Quiet Places,’” 10. Moses’ catch-22 fascinated white liberals like Jack Newfield, who romanticized it to a national audience: “The more [Moses] withdraws to the last row at meetings[,] the less he says to anyone, the more his legend grows.” (Newfield, “Moses in Mississippi,” *The Village Voice*, December 3, 1964)

<sup>68</sup> Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 419-420, 435-436; Sellers and Terrell, *The River of No Return*, 133-137.

During SNCC's February 12-19, 1965, meeting at Atlanta's Gammon Theological Seminary, Moses again stayed silent as 'hardliners' pushed through Forman's proposed structure. The field staff was added to the Coordinating Committee (originally two representatives from each state) and only paid staff could now make decisions, through majority vote rather than consensus. A new "secretariat" constituted of the Executive Secretary (Forman), Chairman (Lewis), and a Program Secretary (Sellers). Forman and Lewis received authority to make formal policy decisions in between Executive Committee-meetings. The Committee, expanded to twenty-one members, became dominated by 'hardliners' too. Forman celebrated this as a "working-class victory," but acknowledged that the meeting "was stormy, even traumatic," with many abstaining from voting "out of confusion or dislike for the general atmosphere."<sup>69</sup>

Having always opposed subordination to majority vote for the life-threatening work they did, Moses finally spoke up. "If you want to keep a slave, give a man the vote and tell him he's free," he said. But his attempt to show his colleagues that they were being manipulated under the pretense of democracy was lost on the meeting. But if he elaborated, it meant a formal challenge to the 'hardliner'-leadership. Feeling caught in the paradox of keeping "SNCC from becoming conventionally political without becoming conventionally political," Moses declined to fight the 'hardliners.' Instead, he announced a few nights later that he had changed his name to Bob Parris and would leave Mississippi. "It was clear to me that they couldn't make me into such a [leading or media] figure, if they couldn't use my name," he later explained, "just the fact that you have to stop and say that Robert Parris is in fact Robert Moses, is enough to confuse a lot of people."<sup>70</sup>

His announcements have been mythologized in movement circles as much as his entry into Mississippi. Some enjoyed calling him Parris and revered his act as, in James Miller's words, "one of the most striking gestures of self-abnegating democratic (anti-)leadership in the Sixties." Others thought Moses had succumbed to a mental breakdown. "Everyone thought he was crazy," one witness commented. Forman called it the meeting's "most difficult and confusing hour." In subsequent years, as Moses made more decisions few understood, workers mourned him as another 'movement casualty.' "One thinks of Bob with a heavy sense of possibilities lost, roads not taken, hopes unnecessarily destroyed," one lamented in 1970.<sup>71</sup>

Yet what seemed an incoherent, abstract ramble was actually Moses' strongest indictment of the 'hardliner'-policy to date. The whole name change ceremony, he disclosed in 1984, was a "reaction" against SNCC's power-seeking direction. Even Cleveland Sellers acknowledged that while Moses seemed "on the verge of hysteria, he appeared to be in complete control of himself." The ceremony provides insight into Moses' gloomy state of mind. Recalling his parents' breakdown, he described how SNCC-workers likewise tried "to keep hold of themselves in a world gone mad like Mississippi." He said he was under a negative strain and needed a break. His name change was "the only way to cope" because then he could change from "Moses the Myth" to "Robert [Parris] the Man." He looked directly at others with strong leadership positions in SNCC like Lewis, Forman, and Carmichael, and said: "It's time for you to leave." They too, he implied, were "becoming creatures of the media, contending for power."<sup>72</sup>

<sup>69</sup> Carson, *In Struggle*, 151-152; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 437-439; SNCC Meeting, February 1965, minutes, William Heath Papers; Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 80, 96.

<sup>70</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, July 31, 1984, Taylor Branch Papers; Moses interview Carson, 1982; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 438; SNCC Meeting, February 1965, minutes, William Heath Papers; Lynd, "Mississippi: 1961-1962," 7.

<sup>71</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, July 31, 1984, Taylor Branch Papers; Hammerback and Jensen, "'Working in 'Quiet Places,'" 10; Pat McGauley, interview by KZSU Radio Station Stanford University, 1965, transcript, KZSU Project South Interview Collection, Microfiche 2479 (E), Library of Congress; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 439.

<sup>72</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, July 31, 1984, Taylor Branch Papers; Sellers and Terrell, *The River of No Return*, 137-139; Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 589-590; Lewis and D'Orso, *Walking with the Wind*, 366.

Throughout Moses pretend to be drunk—although he clearly was not—and passed around wine, and some cheese that someone happened to have with him. The latter helped Moses' point because it was interpreted as a 'last supper' that symbolized his equation with Jesus. But since the bottle was near empty, he implied that with him "no-one should expect miracles." Passing the wine and pretending to be drunk *were* intentional. That afternoon one uneducated Southern black had drunk whiskey to get the courage to address SNCC's "prominent" members. Because he had been drinking, some 'hardliners' denied him speaking time. The fact that less "qualified" workers felt they needed to "rev themselves up" before exercising their right to speak and then having disciplinary rules curb that right, Moses said in 1984, "got to me." Clearly, "the willingness of people to...speak for themselves was under threat." By passing the wine Moses dramatized *everyone's* right to speak. He pretended to be drunk "to see if they would put me down" too, and since no-one did, he exposed the hypocrisy of the 'hardliners' rules. But most bystanders, being less educated in symbolism than Moses, looked at him like Alice looked at the rambling Mad Hatter in Wonderland. Sellers called his monologue "a complicated existential exposition" that "was too heavy." "People were stunned. Dead silent. No-one knew what exactly to make of this," John Lewis recalled. "But everyone knew it was hugely significant." Moses and Dona Richards simply left when the bottle returned to him. He never played a directive role in SNCC-gatherings again.<sup>73</sup>

The significance of Moses' withdrawal has been intensely debated among movement participants and historians. The overriding view is that his absence hastened SNCC's decline. Some attributed an enormous personal power to him that questions the degree of group-centered leadership in SNCC. Taylor Branch described him as carrying "the moral weight...of the heavy expectations that he alone could bridge the growing fissures between sharecroppers, saints, and sharp-tongued dialecticians." Several movement participants promoted this view too. One observed in 1965 that the movement "split first of all because Bob Moses has left...since then most of the people have said...we certainly should have supported Moses [and] toned down Forman." John Lewis also believes that Moses' departure fatally damaged SNCC: "If there was one thread that might have held it all together, it would have been Bob Moses...But he absolutely refused to fill that role, and we would all suffer because of it."<sup>74</sup>

Such interpretations, however, neglect SNCC's daily realities in 1965. As Julian Bond argued in 2008, "it wasn't as if we bam! just threw up our hands and said 'Oh what will it be'...we lost an important figure [but] that doesn't mean we slipped into disarray." One December 1964 report already noted that Moses was "taking no part in key day to day decisions," indicating he had abdicated leadership well before his physical withdrawal. Mary King confirmed this in a January 1965 letter: Moses "has not been director of the state. The meeting at Hattiesburg went on without him as everything had been going along without him. This meant that others acted as 'directors.'" Some even credited him for leaving. "[I]f he had stayed and become institutionalized," one worker argued in 1969, "whatever value Bob had to the movement would have been lost."<sup>75</sup>

Moreover, Moses' closest colleagues stuck to his organizing approach. For several months, Clayborne Carson noted, SNCC-veterans like Charlie Cobb "continued...resisting the rapid imposition of organizational constraints." Stokely Carmichael felt "a responsibility to carry on the work Bob had given so much of himself of." In Alabama he used the slow organizing technique Moses popularized in Mississippi.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*; Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 170.

<sup>74</sup> Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*, 30; Pat McGauley, interview by KZSU Radio Station Stanford University, 1965, transcript, KZSU Project South Interview Collection, Microfiche 2479 (E), Library of Congress; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 206; Lewis and D'Orso, *Walking with the Wind*, 303; John Lewis, interview by author, Washington DC, November 16, 2009; Mary King, email interview by author, December 8, 2009.

<sup>75</sup> Julian Bond, interview by author, Washington DC, October 27, 2008; Hunter R. Morey, "Cross Roads in COFO," report, December 3, 1964, File #1050, Reel 42, Series XVII, Other Organizations, SNCC Papers; Mary King to John Lewis, letter, January 10, 1965, Box 3, Folder 1, Mary King Papers; Fred Mangrum, interview by Robert Wright, July 8, 1969, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University. Moreover, some SNCC-projects, like in Arkansas, blossomed in 1965 and others, like in Georgia, faltered without having been linked to Moses' presence beforehand or departure after.

"I just got into that Bob Moses bag," he said that summer, "I had to see what I could do in the place no one else would go." Until the murder of a white worker in August 1965, he opposed restraints on white presence on the same reasoning Moses had used to sanction Freedom Summer. 1965 summer volunteer John Cumbler stated in 2007 that COFO-workers often started arguments with "if Moses were here he would argue we should..." Although Julian Bond suspected that some "just made things up that they wanted to do," the fact that they did so for months sustains Cumbler's claim that Moses "continued to permeate the best part of the Movement...His spirit was still there."<sup>76</sup>

The assumption that if Moses had stayed, SNCC's outcome would have been different or delayed, dismisses the power of the currents of time and history. Many SNCC-workers, Julian Bond explained, "thought about leaving" and would have done so regardless. When they lamented his absence, they were merely expressing a sense of personal loss; they wanted Moses "to be engaged with us." "If Bob would get into this, then we'd see more clearly," Bond paraphrased their thinking. Lewis agreed that there was little personal ill-feeling because the philosophy of nonviolence called for allowing individuals to go "only as far as their conscience would go." Mary King concurred: "One must be loath in making judgments about another human being's decisions about self-assertion or when is the right time to leave."<sup>77</sup>

In fact, Moses never intended to leave SNCC permanently. He still believed that "SNCC was the organizing energy of the movement" and would never "move without SNCC [or] set up something which bypassed SNCC." "My feeling coming out of '64 was that everything depended on SNCC," he reflected in 1982, and "on SNCC recuperating." Rather than deserting SNCC, he took the back seat for now: "[B]asically I was waiting on SNCC; that's what I [did] for almost two years...I wasn't looking for SNCC to provide us with a program, but I was waiting for SNCC to resolve the basic problems that had surfaced as a result of '64. And I felt that it was worth whatever amount of time it took to resolve them." Taking an active role in debates would have mattered little: "There wasn't anything I could say that would be helpful. The problems that we were trying to grapple with weren't of the kind that could be dealt with in one meeting. It would take what people weren't willing to give, which was time."<sup>78</sup>

On the first day of the Selma-to-Montgomery march Moses and his wife moved to Birmingham to "try some city organizing." They were still on SNCC's payroll but had not reported to Alabama Director Silas Norman. This upset SNCC's Executive Committee, which convened on April 12 to curb such instances of indiscipline. The meeting soon dissolved into an attack on all 'floaters.' In a fashion far removed from SNCC's early spirit, the group evaluated each worker to decide whether SNCC should be "shaping [them] up or shipping out." Moses' and Dona Richards' unwillingness to work "within the discipline of the state project" could not be ignored. "I will not look for them," Norman complained, "they must contact me." "Someone should find out what they are doing," Ruby Doris Smith agreed, "They can't say their work is irrelevant to SNCC." Marion Barry objected that "if it was anybody else, we'd be raising hell." James Forman concurred: "All should be subject to discipline. If Bob is above discipline, he should be project director." Although Stokely Carmichael disliked the fact that Moses could "get away with a lot," he opposed the personal attacks on him: "People here are incapable of dealing with the real problem, which is lack of programs. That is why people 'float.' Dealing with floaters deals with symptoms rather than the cause." But Forman said he liked discussing individuals: "This is the first time in this organization that we have

<sup>76</sup> Carson, *In Struggle*, 157; Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 437; Newfield, *A Prophetic Minority*, 109; Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*, 260; John Cumbler, interview by author, Nijmegen, the Netherlands, March 28, 2008, and Julian Bond, interview by author, Washington DC, October 27, 2008.

<sup>77</sup> Julian Bond and John Lewis, interviews by author, Washington DC, October 27, 2008, and November 16, 2009; Mary King, email interview by author, December 8, 2009.

<sup>78</sup> Moses interview Carson, 1982; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, July 31, 1984, and interview by Joe Sinsheimer, December 5, 1984, Taylor Branch Papers.



[done] some constructive work on the individual level." The Committee continued evaluating individuals for two days.<sup>79</sup>

Two weeks later Moses and Richards appeared at a small Alabama SNCC-meeting, but it only underscored the growing divide between them and their colleagues. Several observed that locals benefitted from strong direction because "people know how things are, but they don't know what to do about it." Carmichael argued that SNCC should move beyond "just talking to people." Such a program needed clear directives from SNCC. "Some people need structure," Norman insisted. "I [have] to create a structured program in order to evaluate staff." Richards dismissed this as acting "like SCLC": "A good organization brings people together, a bad one makes everything neat and compartmentalized." SNCC needed to get "out of the bind that we make the plans and the people wait for our decisions," Moses softly concurred. SNCC wanted "to create an atmosphere that is best for the workers [but] is it best for the people?...Remember the people don't have our frustrations." He drew mathematical charts outlining the different relations between organizers and locals to show that a movement of different community groups could only be created if the organizer removed himself as the reference point. This could be realized, he emphasized, by implementing SNCC's Executive Committee's recent proposal of organizing 'People's Conferences.' But many SNCC staff members considered such meetings, where locals could talk without a deadline and workers' guidance, as too close to the 'freedom high'-spirit. They agreed to organize the conferences, perhaps in reverence to Moses, but without his active leadership—he insisted that the point was for locals "to let it snowball from there"—they never materialized.<sup>80</sup>

Meanwhile the Vietnam War increasingly diverted Moses' attention. His movement experiences had strengthened his commitment to pacifism. Already at James Chaney's memorial service on August 6, 1964, he raised a newspaper headlining the recent Gulf of Tonkin-Incident and declared: "The same kind of racism that killed these young men is going to kill a lot more people in Vietnam." He later explained that "the country [was] unable to see Vietnam for exactly the same reasons...they didn't see us." The government defended "freedom" in Vietnam but not in Mississippi, he stated that summer: "The guerrilla war in Mississippi is not much different from that in Vietnam. But when we tried to see President Johnson, his secretary said that Vietnam was popping up all over his calendar and he hadn't time to talk to us." Moses saw this as the same hypocrisy that "sent me [to Mississippi] in the first place," namely "all the hue and cry about Eastern Europeans and the right to vote in the '50s." Moses had met North Vietnamese citizens in Africa. "That was the first time," he said in 1982, "I could actually get in touch with, and see them as people without the whole propaganda in this country."<sup>81</sup>

Moses first expressed his views on a national level after Tom Hayden came to Birmingham and asked him to speak at SDS' April 17 anti-war-protest in Washington. Before 20,000 demonstrators—nearly all of them white—Moses indicted "the prosecutors of the war" as "the same people who refused to protect civil rights in the South." During the May 21-22 Vietnam 'teach-ins' at Berkeley he addressed a largely white audience of 10,000 people. His speech captured perfectly how Moses merged his cosmopolitan background and organic experiences in Mississippi into a philosophy that treated his roles in the civil rights and peace movements as "inseparable." Introducing himself as a Third World member, Moses told his listeners that if they wanted to do anything about Vietnam, they had "to learn from the

<sup>79</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by Joe Sinsheimer, December 5, 1984, Taylor Branch Papers; Sellers and Terrell, *The River of No Return*, 145-146; Executive Committee Meeting, April 12-14, 1965, minutes, Files #0410-0426, Reel 3, Series II, Executive and Central Committees, Executive Committee, SNCC Papers; Carson, *In Struggle*, 169-170.

<sup>80</sup> Carson, *In Struggle*, 170-171; Alabama SNCC Workshop, April 21-23, 1965, minutes, Box 1, Folder 3, Mary King Papers; Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*, 268; "'People's Conference' Will Decide Program," *The Student Voice* 5, no. 23 (March 1965): 1, 4, in *The Student Voice*, ed. Carson, 207; Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*, 213.

<sup>81</sup> Wallace Roberts, "All My Days: Memories of Freedom Summer," unpublished essay, in author's possession; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, February 15, 1991, Taylor Branch Papers; Belfrage, *Freedom Summer*, 9-11; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Dick Gordon, for "The Story with Dick Gordon," America Public Media radio station University of North Carolina, February 11, 2009; Moses interview Carson, 1982.

South.” “I saw a picture in an AP release,” he explained. “It said, ‘Marine captures Communist rebel.’ Now I looked at that picture and what I saw was a little colored boy standing against a wire fence with a big huge white Marine with a gun in his back. But what I knew was that the people in this country saw a Communist rebel.” If his audience used the South “as a looking glass, not a lightning rod,” Moses said, it could “offer a different reality” to the nation. “If you can begin to understand...why you don’t move when a Negro is killed the same way you move when a white person is killed, then maybe you can begin to understand this country in relation to Vietnam and the Third World.” He repeated his “murderer’s jury”-theory: “You can learn when it is that a society gets together and plans and executes and allows its members to murder and then go free. And if you learn something about that, then maybe you’ll learn something about this country and how it plans and executes murders elsewhere in the world.” He told them to write Hazel Palmer, a black maid who became an MFDP-leader. Through her they could learn about similar ‘faceless leaders’ in the Third World as persons instead of political labels.<sup>82</sup>

Many civil rights movement supporters disliked Moses’ anti-war activities. He recalled in 1984 that when he and Staughton Lynd talked to John Bennett, Dean of Union Theological Seminary, after the April rally, the latter questioned “my right to be there” because black involvement in the antiwar effort jeopardized the black struggle. “That really got me,” Moses said. “I got angry. Well, I didn’t rant and rave.” Critics like Bennett believed that the peace movement diverted attention, energy, and President Johnson’s goodwill for the cause of racial equality. Even Lynd acknowledged the inherent difficulties in combining the goals of different movements. “Moses condemned America’s action in bombing North Vietnam,” he wrote in 1964. “Yet at Atlantic City Moses’ party pledged alliance to the man who ordered the bombing. The dilemma of victim and executioner is literal and cruel.” Moses’ wife felt that involvement in the peace movement threatened the fundraising needed to “build a significant black political force.” Many Southern blacks shared such misgivings. SNCC-workers perceived an “intense bitterness about the war” in black communities, but little interest in action. Blacks’ unwillingness to follow Moses confirms sociologist Max Weber’s theory that for a charismatic leader like Moses to attain—or maintain—influence the existence of a (perceived) crisis situation is indispensable. “The war,” Moses admitted, just “was not something that people were concerned about.” Black conservatives considered opposition to the war as unpatriotic. When McComb teenagers opposed the draft in their MFDP-newsletter, Charles Evers and others denounced the MFDP as Communist. The MFDP then refused to endorse the statement. Moses, one worker concluded, “is completely out of touch with the people [and what they] can and will do.”<sup>83</sup>

Moses, however, felt that black involvement in the peace struggle would *benefit* their own. Feeling connected to a broader movement might help COFO-workers cope with ‘battle fatigue.’ In addition,

<sup>82</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interviews by Taylor Branch, July 30 and 31, 1984, and interview by Joe Sinsheimer, December 5, 1984, and Bob Moses, “Speech,” transcript, in *We Accuse* (Berkeley: Diablo Press, 1965), ed. James Petras, 149-153, Taylor Branch Papers; Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge*, 223-224; Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 183; “On Peace and Civil Rights,” *The Southern Patriot*, 1965; Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, 370; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Blackside, Inc., May 19, 1986, for *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries; Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 54-55; Carson, *In Struggle*, 184-185.

<sup>83</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interviews by Taylor Branch, July 30 and 31, 1984, Taylor Branch Papers; Lynd, “SNCC: The Beginning of Ideology,” August 1964, Box 1, Folder 3, Mary King Papers; Carson, *In Struggle*, 187-188; Ann Ruth Willner, *The Spellbinders: Charismatic Political Leadership* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 51; John Buffington, Eugene Turitz, Anonymous White Male, and Pat McGauley, interviews by KZSU Radio Station Stanford University, 1965, transcripts, KZSU Project South Interview Collection, Microfiche 2479 (E), Library of Congress; Woods, *Black Struggle, Red Scare*, 218; Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge*, 278. Although she opposed the war as much as her husband, Richards particularly feared that SNCC-workers’ involvement in the war increased Communist charges against them (Moses’ involvement already spurred a Congressional investigation in SNCC’s activities). “We can’t do anything to help the Vietnam situation,” she therefore wrote in September 1965, “[but] we can hurt ourselves by trying.” SNCC did not formerly oppose the war until 1966; Martin Luther King not until 1967.

now blacks had the franchise, he told *The Southern Patriot*, they had to make it meaningful: "People need a chance to vote on real issues. That [includes] debate on foreign policy." Blacks were obligated to speak up; just as they had helped the South see that its "basic problem lies not with outsiders but itself," they now had to help the nation awake from the myths that all its problems were caused by extremists, "the Ku Klux Klan[,] delinquents in Northern ghettos [or] communist nations." To mitigate the criticism Moses nonetheless asked a leave of absence from SNCC.<sup>84</sup>

Moses then joined a British labor organizer he had met at the April rally in contacting traditional peace groups. He even attended Allard Lowenstein's Encampment for Citizenship, a New York summer camp for peace activists, and phoned Bayard Rustin. But Rustin, like most traditional peace organizers, refused involvement for fear of jeopardizing the Great Society-programs. Realizing that only the New Left could raise "momentum" against the war, Lynd, Moses, and pacifist David Dellinger planned a Washington Summer Action Project. Moses and Richards moved to New York, where he worked with white pacifist A.J. Muste, and then to Washington. The Project's highlight was a four-day "Assembly of Unrepresented People" with workshops ranging from foreign policy to community organizing. Participants included SDS, the National Council of Churches, the War Resisters' League, artists, lawyers, and professors. Most were white, but Moses brought thirty black Mississippians. SNCC did not participate, despite Moses' request "to break [its] isolation" and start working in a movement centered "on the entire American public" rather than just "the Negro ghetto." On August 6, the anniversary of the Hiroshima bombing, a 'prayer vigil' was held near the White House. There Moses denounced the fierce reaction to the McComb statement as racism since a similar 'Declaration of Conscience' by Muste was accepted "through the White House gate." On August 9, the Nagasaki bombing anniversary, some 800 marched to the Capitol to present Congress with 'Declarations of Peace' composed in the workshops, but American Nazis threw red paint on Moses, Lynd, and Dellinger, just before they and 300 other marchers were arrested.<sup>85</sup>

After his release on bail, Moses spoke again with Lowenstein. Seeing the war as "really a war against China," the latter proposed taking a group of students there. Tom Hayden was thinking of inviting another group to Vietnam. Moses briefly thought about going on either one of the trips, but instead accepted an offer to stay at the house of Bill Sutherland, of the War Resisters League, in Tanzania's then capital, Dar Es Salaam. In 1991 Moses stated that he wished to gain "insight about the world situation, because [I] really believed it was going to be 50 years before the mistakes within the movement and the Democratic Party...could be regained." Meanwhile in SNCC the climate of suspicion had increased. In May, Dona Richards had barely escaped injury when a frightened cook accidentally threw a meat cleaver after some 'floaters' brought knives to a conflict with 'hardliners.' After this, Cleve Sellers observed, "the Hardliners were in control of SNCC." He notified workers that if they failed to satisfactorily report on

<sup>84</sup> Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*, 385-386; "One Freedom's Worker's Views—A Talk with Bob Parris," *The Southern Patriot*, October 1965; King, *Freedom Song*, 495; Carson, *In Struggle*, 185. It is unclear whether Moses took the leave of absence. In the *Southern Patriot* he mentions that the Executive Committee after much debate agreed with his argument that such a leave of absence was unnecessary because civil rights organizations "must maintain the right of [its people] to function as individuals," yet from this time onwards Moses was no longer on SNCC's payroll, implying that he took the leave of absence nonetheless.

<sup>85</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interviews by Taylor Branch, July 30, 1984, and interview by Joe Sinsheimer, December 5, 1984, Taylor Branch Papers; Robert Parris Moses, interview by William Chafe, October 7, 1989, Allard Lowenstein Papers; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Anne Romaine, September 1966/November 14, 1987, Anne Romaine Papers; A.J. Muste to Lucille Montgomery, letter, July 13, 1965, Reel 2, Lucille Montgomery Papers; Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*, 278-279; "Summer Activities of Various Groups Attending Washington Conference," "Call For An Assembly of Unrepresented People," and "We Declare Peace," pamphlets, Box 12, Folder 8, Students for a Democratic Society Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society; Robert Parris Moses to Walter Tillow, letter, no date [likely May or June 1965], Box 1, Folder 2, Walter Tillow Papers.

their activities, they would be fired. In Africa Moses hoped to regain “some sense of direction” for the movement and “some hope and inspiration...as Malcolm X” had found there a year earlier.<sup>86</sup>

In October Moses and Dona Richards flew to Ghana, where they attended a conference of the pan-Africanist organization OAU (Organization of African Unity). Kwame Nkrumah, the first African leader to declare independence in 1957, hosted it in Accra. Richards marveled at the street banners everywhere proclaiming “Africa Must Unite.” Conference attendees were mostly black nationalists. “These people are engaged in actual fighting in their, yet unfree, countries,” she reported to SNCC. They then went to Tanzania, and visited W.E.B. DuBois’ son and widow in Egypt. They returned home after staying in Paris and London in early 1966. Moses, however, did not wholly share his wife’s excitement. American blacks, he acknowledged in 1982, “never did really grasp Africa.” They met several revolutionaries whom Malcolm X had visited who were “still excited,” but “the mood on the whole continent...had soured significantly.” This deepened Moses’ depression: “Africa was falling apart. They were fighting each other, regimes were toppling,” including Nkrumah’s. Yet because SNCC still had no clear direction upon their return, Moses was willing to keep pursuing the avenues his wife was exploring, including the organization of an all-black conference called *Roots*, held in New Orleans, on “the decolonization of black people.” Several other black women, like Don Harris’ wife Tina and Janet Jemmott, a New York 1964 summer volunteer who now worked on the Lowndes County Freedom Organization, helped too.<sup>87</sup>

The women at the conference presented a paper that explored the idea of “black consciousness.” They were influenced as much by their experiences in Mississippi as by world events. Whites’ presence in Mississippi, Ruby Doris Smith’s biographer explained, had complicated black women’s struggles with their femininity and self-image. Most black female workers resented what Alvin Poussaint termed the ‘white African queen complex’—white female volunteers’ “repressed fantasy of the intelligent, brave, and beautiful white woman leading the poor, downtrodden, and oppressed black man to freedom.” Smith and other black women also resented white women’s prominence in SNCC and their close proximity to black male workers. This threatened everyone’s physical safety and interracial dating problematized internal relationships. Apart from competition and threatening black women’s self-worth—already judged by “a white female standard of beauty and morality”—they feared that white women used black men. Their growing ‘pro-black’ emotions, Moses explained in 2010, did not represent “a nationalist perspective” like Black Power, but rather a “very deep psychological perspective that was mixed with politics...[This] was what I was responding to [with *Roots*. These women] were saying we need to do this.”<sup>88</sup>

The women asked Moses to attend, he continued, because he “could help bring in other people.” He “went along, trying to see if there was some way, something to do,” but the paper “wasn’t my paper.” Most historians and contemporaries nonetheless ascribe the conference and the paper to him<sup>89</sup>. They played up his disillusionment with white liberals, and described him as a “tragic hero,” the

<sup>86</sup> Notes Taylor Branch, February 15, 1991 and Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, July 30, 1984, Taylor Branch Papers; Robert Parris Moses, interview by William Chafe, October 7, 1989, Allard Lowenstein Papers; Sellers and Terrell, *The River of No Return*, 142-146; Marsh, *God’s Long Summer*, 173-174; Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 367-368; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 444; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Anne Romaine, September 1966/November 14, 1987, Anne Romaine Papers.

<sup>87</sup> Notes Taylor Branch, February 15, 1991 and Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, July 31, 1984, Taylor Branch Papers; Dona and Bob Moses to “SNCC People,” letter, October 10, 1965, Box 6, Folder 10, Ella Baker Papers; Moses interview Carson, 1982; Robert Parris Moses, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 15, 2010; Carson, *In Struggle*, 201. Moses recalled they raised the money for the conference by organizing a dance at a ballroom in Harlem because Richards’ mother knew the ballroom’s owner and Jemmott’s brother, Jerry, was a well-known guitarist. For more on Jemmott’s time in Natchez, see her entry in Holsaert, et al. *Hands on the Freedom Plow*.

<sup>88</sup> Carson, *In Struggle*, 201; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, July 31, 1984, Taylor Branch Papers; Robert Parris Moses, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 15, 2010; Fleming, *Soon We Will Not Cry*, 116-140; Alvin Poussaint, “The Stresses of the White Female Worker in the Civil Rights Movement in the South,” report, October 1966 (William Heath Papers).

<sup>89</sup> This is likely explained by contemporary denigrating views of female agency and the national incomprehension of

idealist turned sour, like the movement itself. Moses' brief decision to stop speaking to whites shortly after the conference spurred this interpretation. John Lewis, Roy Wilkins, and Joseph Rauh claimed that Moses already "left Atlantic City vowing never to speak to a white man again." Others, like Taylor Branch and Stokely Carmichael, stated that Moses announced the decision at his name change ceremony, which seems unlikely given his subsequent involvement with the peace movement. Moreover, in the interview that he gave to *Pacific Scene* in February 1965, he stated his unaltered "faith principle" that if whites "were presented with real information about people and how they live...they would [not] consciously choose to isolate other people." Even though he pondered the idea of a shadow government, he still hoped that both races could overcome their differences: "The less overlay of bitterness, the more possible to work out a reconciliation."<sup>90</sup>

Many references to Moses' embrace of black nationalism depend on hearsay or the person's relationship with him. In interviews with SNCC-workers, rumors about Moses being "extremely negative in terms of white people" are rampant, yet none provide factual details. Stanley Wise, SNCC's Executive Secretary during its 'Black Power'-period, claimed that Moses' Africa trip convinced him to sever his relationships with whites. "These were people he cut away in one fell swoop," Wise stated without naming any. Others, like Dorie Ladner, refused to sacrifice their beloved image of Moses and denied he ever made the decision. Or, like Mary King, they described it as a passing phase caused by temporary emotional stress: "He was probably emotionally, spiritually, and physically depleted...[it] was not directed at his personal associates but was a rejection of his acculturation and the overwhelming and downpressing constructs of white culture. At that moment, the world—the white world—was too much with him." This too, SNCC-worker Janice Goodman said in 2012, was "part of the Moses myth, particularly among whites—he could do no wrong." Some blamed his wife, Dona Richards. "One could understand that coming from Dona, as many of us supposed, but not from Bob," one stated in 2012. "[He] is not Stokely, he is not Rap<sup>91</sup>," Goodman explained, "so it must have been the influence of Lady MacBeth."<sup>92</sup>

The realities of human behavior are often more complex, and this was doubly true for Robert Moses. He certainly promoted black nationalism in the Booker T. Washington self-help sense, as his proposals for parallel institutions demonstrate. In addition, the MFDP, as Julian Bond has argued, "served as a prototype for the model of Black Power advocated [by] Carmichael." Furthermore, Janice Goodman asserts, "[it is] difficult to believe anyone could influence Moses to do that in which he does not sincerely believed or thought was ethically or morally wrong." In 2010 Moses confirmed that he had had no "problem trying to see where [his wife's views] would lead." Considering the sacrifices SNCC-people made,

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the movement's shift to Black Power. It was more fascinating to attribute both to Moses, beside Martin Luther King the symbol of the 1960s' integrationist movement.

<sup>90</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 15, 2010; Lewis and D'Orso, *Walking with the Wind*, 292; Roy Wilkins and Tom Mathews, *Standing Fast: The Autobiography of Roy Wilkins* (New York: Viking Press, 1982), 306; Joseph Rauh, interview by Blackside, Inc., October 31, 1985, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries; Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 590; Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 435; "Moses in Mississippi Raises Some Universal Questions," *Pacific Scene*, February 3, 1965; Hammerback and Jensen, "Robert Parris Moses," *African-American Orators*, ed. Leeman, 266-267. Emily Stoper even claimed that Moses' decision to stop speaking to whites, explained by his having become disillusioned in white schools, instigated a bitter "pattern with regard to whites" among "Northern black people in SNCC." Such analyses, however, not only lumped advocates of nationalism and their motivations indiscriminately together, but also confused the timeline of when it became a prominent source in SNCC. (Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 85)

<sup>91</sup> H. "Rap" Brown, SNCC's chairman in 1967, was a black nationalist known for his flamboyant, violent rhetoric. Under his chairmanship, SNCC changed its name to Student National Coordinating Committee and briefly tried an alliance with the Black Panther Party. (See Carson's *In Struggle* and Brown's autobiography *Die, Nigger, Die*)

<sup>92</sup> Edward Brown, interview by Harold O. Lewis, June 30, 1967, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University; Carson, *In Struggle*, 201, 330n; Greenberg, ed., *Circle of Trust*, 80, 240; Dorie Ladner, interview by author, Washington DC, November 16, 2008; Janice Goodman, email interview by June 2, 2012; King, *Freedom Song*, 530.

he thought it was “a little much for people to say, well, ‘you can’t explore this avenue.’” Yet the accusation of his wife’s influence was not wholly far-fetched. Shortly after the *Roots*-conference their relationship had cooled, partly over Moses’ overemphasis on the war and partly because she and CORE-worker Rudy Lombard were, in Moses’ words, “trying to work out some type of relationship.” “I was really following what my then wife, Dona, wanted to do,” he confessed, “and then it turned out to be [what] my future wife, Janet [Jemmott], wanted to do.”<sup>93</sup>

Moreover, Moses was more exhausted by his leadership role than hostile to whites’ presence. He had escaped leadership in the black community, but now, Moses explained in 1982, he found himself “under pressure to act as sort of an adviser to the white [peace] movement.” It was time, he felt, “for them to develop their own strategies and thoughts.” In 2010 he denied that his decision was directed at all whites: “I never decided to stop speaking to white people. I decided not to speak to Staughton Lynd and Mendy Samstein,” meaning whites who leaned on him. “There were plenty of white people I was speaking to. So that was not the issue.” Yet Janice Goodman remembered how she and black SNCC-worker Mike Thelwell once saw him in Washington. They had not seen him in months, and thus did not ‘lean’ on him. But “Moses simply turned his back and walked away,” she recalled, and “it was my [white] presence that was the sticking point” because Moses spoke with Thelwell when he left her. For her and whites who heard similar stories this was traumatizing. “It hurt her very deeply, because any one of us would have been literally willing to take the bullet for Bob,” one explained.<sup>94</sup>

Moses supported separate black conferences because it was the only way for SNCC to recuperate. “[W]hatever energy I had, I needed to put it into the black movement and the black community, and nationalism and the problems we were having, and to stay with that and ride it through,” he said in 1982, implying that he suspected Black Power to be a passing phase. “There’s a real need for black people to meet by themselves,” he explained. “SNCC-meetings dragged on interminably [because] people never could say what they felt.” Integrated meetings perpetuated the situation where blacks attacked whites and vice versa. Moses therefore saw *Roots* as a means to provide this space: he wanted to provide a pragmatic—as opposed to an ideological—solution, for the sake of *both* races. He even claimed that “part of my involvement in the peace movement was...just a way of helping the white students get out of the civil rights movement.” Outsiders, he lamented, analyzed this wrongly: “[I]n this country, it’s inevitable that you interpret [something like *Roots*] as anti-white...it’s impossible [to] have an interpretation that people are searching for an identity, which is not necessarily to be geared at cutting down somebody else’s identity.”<sup>95</sup>

Moses’ idea of nationalism therefore did not equal the “politics of rage” that SNCC or the Black Panthers turned it into with ‘Black Power.’ Indeed, he witnessed SNCC’s unveiling of Black Power with great apprehension. When Stokely Carmichael first announced the phrase during the Meredith March in June 1966, Moses was staying with Amzie Moore. He saw Carmichael in Jackson at the end of the march, but, he recalled, “you couldn’t talk to [Stokely]. He was, you know, caught up.” Carmichael was preoccupied with the media, which delved into his slogan with fascination and condemnation alike. Moses rejected Carmichael’s and other black nationalists’ playing to the media by means of incendiary rhetoric. “Once SNCC got a charismatic media person, Stokely and then Rap, the dynamics within the organization shifted,” he later stated. “[T]he organizers stopped organizing because it was more glamorous to do what Stokely was doing.” The new emphasis on projecting SNCC’s leadership “kept people from developing a

<sup>93</sup> Julian Bond and Janice Goodman, email interviews by author, December 4, 2008 and June 2, 2012; Robert Parris Moses, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 15, 2010; Julian Bond, “Reflections on SNCC’s Political Legacy,” in *Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary*, ed. Rubin, 114-115; Moses interview Carson, 1982.

<sup>94</sup> Moses interview Carson, 1982; Janice Goodman and Sheila Michaels, email interviews by author, June 2, 2012, and May 6, 2012. See also interview Sheila Michaels with Janice Goodman, May 18, 2005 at Columbia University’s Oral History Records.

<sup>95</sup> Moses interview Carson, 1982; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 201.



style of working which could have really allowed the organization to survive.” The Black Power-concept also could not be transformed into a program on which the entire black community could find consensus. “In the end,” he said in 2010, “there was nothing to do. There were things to think about, but nothing to do.” Moreover, Moses’ unwavering commitment to nonviolence was incompatible with the Black Power-line of self-defense. He also deplored the way that Black Power had seemed to applaud and encourage rioting in Northern black communities. When Carmichael “yelled ‘Black Power,’” he said in 1989, “that was it. We lost the ability to speak to the inner city.” Black Power was a “departure from what we [had been] doing in Mississippi” and “wasn’t able to sustain a movement.”<sup>96</sup>

Few of his colleagues, however, saw the dichotomy between Moses’ intentions and the Black Power-movement around them. “You got Stokely working in Lowndes [and] Moses [and] his conference,” Ed Brown said in 1967, and this explained “how you get Black Power.” Because Moses fled the country shortly after, gossip about his whereabouts and activities—ranging from welfare worker in Harlem to leading guerilla bands in Africa—took over. The mysteries surrounding his disappearance accordingly strengthened rather than diminished his legendary image. But Moses knew nothing of this as he recuperated abroad. A decade later he returned an even more fervent believer in his approach for social change, whose wisdom he reaffirmed in a revived organizing career that successfully combined his cosmopolitan and organic experiences into a new bottom-up movement for racial equality that is still in existence today.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>96</sup> Fleming, *Soon We Will Not Cry*, 162-163; Robert Parris Moses, interviews by Taylor Branch, August 11, 1983, July 31, 1984, and February 15, 1991, and Robert Parris Moses, interview by Joe Sinsheimer, December 5, 1984, Taylor Branch Papers; Agger, *The Sixties at 40*, 183-184, 186-187; Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 612; Hayes, ‘I Used the Term ‘Negro’ and I Was Firmly Corrected,’ 160-161; Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 240; Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 377-378; Robert Parris Moses, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 15, 2010; Morquand, “Up the Opportunity Ladder With Algebra,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, 1989, Box 135, Folder 31, Carl and Anne Braden Papers.

<sup>97</sup> Edward Brown, interview by Harold O. Lewis, June 30, 1967, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University; Lynd, “Mississippi: 1961-1962,” 7; Jack Newfield, *Bread and Roses Too* (New York: Dutton, 1971), 35.



## 11. Epilogue

After the *Roots*-conference Moses retreated to Cleveland, Mississippi, to think about his marriage and his future. According to Amzie Moore, he “didn’t speak to anybody hardly.” He occasionally encountered Mississippi SNCC-workers, but overall he felt invisible. Now that so few sought his advice, he changed his name back to “Moses.” He and Moore talked regularly about Vietnam, but since Moses had cut short his relations with the anti-war movement, Moore said, he was “out of touch with whites.” There was not much to do for Moses within Mississippi. Moore now headed the Bolivar County Head Start program and had “government people [running] in and out” of his home. Moses thought this was “all right,” but felt “it wasn’t a program for the [SNCC] organizers” since such projects were “community-oriented but are not in themselves a movement.” With nine other Mississippi SNCC-workers he went on another two-week retreat in Alabama in July 1966 to “think through what to do” now ‘Black Power’ had taken over SNCC. But essentially he had reached an emotional and organizational dead end. It was clear that he and his unaltered organizing ideas would not find a way back into SNCC any time soon.<sup>1</sup>

Unforeseen events then rendered a return impossible. In Alabama Moses received a notice to report for the draft on September 1. Since he had already passed the legal draft age, he suspected that the FBI had pressured the draft board as retribution for his anti-war activities. He returned to New York and got a job working at a nursery school along with two other drafted black movement workers, a young Mississippian and a New Orleans CORE-worker. Dona Richards and Janet Jemmott worked there too. Moses used the time to “[get] myself together” and make “some big decisions” regarding his marriage and draft-status. He did not want to report for duty, but, having already spent enough time in jail, did not relish the prospect of “going through the court system and facing a lot of hoopla.” He additionally feared that going to jail would revive media interest in his persona. He therefore decided to join the Mississippian and CORE-worker in fleeing the country. The nursery job became a cover where they could work “incommunicado” until they “got ready to leave.” Because the draft board already trailed the other two, Moses travelled to Montreal, Canada, and rented a place for them. He stayed in New York for the rest of August and divorced Richards.<sup>2</sup>

When September arrived Moses borrowed money from his brother Gregory and followed the others to Montreal. He lived under the name Robby, short for Robinson. Because he spoke French he easily obtained a Social Security number. Until June 1968 he earned a meager living doing a variety of jobs like night watchman, janitor, and department store salesman. He sold newspapers over the telephone and worked at the airline service, packing food on trays. It was a “tough” time, he recalled in 1982, because “you’re really thrown out on your own resources.” He had no contact with anyone in the U.S. nor with the other refugees for fear of alerting the Canadian authorities. Feeling “quite isolated,” his mind began to boggle with near-paranoid fears. He even questioned whether the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Malcolm X might not actually “represent the opening salvo of a systematic right-wing offensive to decapitate the movement.” He made a long list of “key figures” that might be the next targets. His shortlist included Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy, James Farmer, Bob Spike, and Taconic Foundation executive Stephen Currier. Within two years, four of them would indeed be killed.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 216; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, July 31, 1984, Taylor Branch Papers; Robert Parris Moses, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 15, 2010; Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 612; Moses interview Dittmer, 1983.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Parris Moses, interview by author, Raleigh, NC, April 15, 2010; Moses interview Carson, 1982; Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 612; Cagin and Dray, *We Are Not Afraid*, 452-453.

<sup>3</sup> Moses interview Carson, 1982; Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 612; Cagin and Dray, *We Are Not Afraid*, 452-453; Notes Taylor Branch, February 15, 1991, Taylor Branch Papers; Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them*, 220; Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 436-437.

Eventually Moses befriended a West-Indian family with four children that adopted him as “Uncle Bob” and helped him get identity papers under their name (Williams). This made life easier because now he “could move around the city.” He “spent most of the [1967] summer out with the kids,” visiting the Canadian Expo. Janet Jemmott, the only one who knew the trio’s hiding place, put Moses in touch with his ex-wife. He then briefly snuck back into the U.S. to “check on Dona, to see how she was doing.” The visit ended any lingering doubts about their relationship. It was the last time he saw her; she later became a Professor in African Studies at Hunter College, remarried, and changed her name to Marimba Ani. Later that year Jemmott visited Moses in Canada. In early 1968 they became an item and later married.<sup>4</sup>

By this time Moses had applied for a Canadian passport under his pseudo-name because he did not “feel safe” and wanted to flee to Africa with Jemmott. They went to Tanzania, because it was the only African country without internal turmoil, and the only one prepared to “stand up to the United States” regarding his draft resistance. When they wanted to embark, the FBI began searching Canadian passport applications to capture James Earl Ray, Martin Luther King’s assassin who had fled to Canada. After a “nerve-wracking flight” Moses and Jemmott safely arrived in Tanzania via Uganda. However, in order to enter Tanzania one needed to show a return ticket. Because they lacked both a return ticket and the money to buy one, the Tanzanian immigration authorities refused them entry. The airline flew them to Egypt, the only country willing to accept them. They stayed in Cairo for nine months, living from money Jemmott’s mother sent and money they earned working for David DuBois’ radio station. In late 1969 they were allowed to enter Tanzania, after Bill Sutherland vouched for them. Moses turned in his false passport and got “special status” asylum under his own name without the American Embassy’s knowledge.<sup>5</sup>

Life in Tanzania, Moses reflected in 2004, turned out to be “a blessing.” He and Jemmott became parents to daughter Maisha and sons Omowale and Tabasuri. Being in a place where “nobody knew his past,” he could live “as just another person...That helped me get grounded again.” They settled in a two-bedroom home surrounded by mountains and open land in a remote area outside Same. “It just seemed calmer[,] slower paced,” Maisha later described the impact on her father, “That kind of space and openness, living without pressure, was healing.” After each child was born, Jemmott’s mother stayed with them for six months. But, his aunt Doris complained in 1993, Moses’ family knew nothing of their whereabouts because Moses feared that the FBI would harass them. Moses’ father died in 1970; according to Aunt Doris, “he drank himself to death in grief.” Moses sent home an African cane to be placed in his casket.<sup>6</sup>

Moses spent his time in Tanzania coaching a basketball team, learning Swahili, and “gaining some insight into Africa, its problems [and] potentials.” The family joined the local small community of ‘Wa Negro,’ African-Americans living in Africa. Bill Sutherland introduced them to President Julius Nyerere, who secured positions for Moses and Jemmott at the Ministry of Education. They taught math and English at Same Secondary School and in 1975 at a school in Kibaha, outside Dar Es Salaam. Same Secondary School had about 300 students, all from different tribes, and a staff of 13 teachers. Here Moses discovered “what it meant for a school *system* to be committed to its children.” Unlike his experiences within the American system, the Tanzanian one “was absolutely dedicated to every student. Because the country needed them,” he later explained. To overcome the language-barrier with his Swahili-speaking students, he developed games as educational tools. In Mississippi-meeting style, he asked them to read

<sup>4</sup> Notes Taylor Branch, February 15, 1991, Taylor Branch Papers; Moses interview Carson, 1982; Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 612.

<sup>5</sup> Moses interview Carson, 1982; Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 612.

<sup>6</sup> Blake, *Children of the Movement*, 37-45; Julia Cass, “The Moses Factor,” *Mother Jones*, May/June 2002, <http://motherjones.com/politics/2002/05/moses-factor> (accessed May 12, 2008); Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 612-613; Doris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, January 8, 1993, Taylor Branch Papers; Moses interview Carson, 1982.

their instruction books, talk among themselves about it, and then translate their discussions into symbolic representations so everyone understood the issues involved.<sup>7</sup>

By 1975 the Moses family increasingly thought about returning to the U.S. Among American blacks there had been much “romanticizing about what it would be like to live in Africa,” Moses explained in 1982, but they quickly “learned what [African-Americans’] boundaries” were in transferring “into African culture and [feeling] comfortable.” Seeing the “politically sophisticated American blacks” as a threat to tribal culture, the Tanzanian authorities withheld citizenship from the Moses family and other Wa Negro. After African-Americans smuggled guns into Tanzania during the 1974 PAC-conference, they were subjected to police searches. “They came in our place and searched [it. This happened] all over the country,” Moses recalled, “[W]herever they found the least thing that scared them...they put people in jail.” Had the country made them feel welcome, they “would have stayed.” Jemmott’s mother began sending clippings about President Jimmy Carter’s pending amnesty for draft evaders and Moses started inquiries about returning to Harvard to complete his PhD in philosophy.<sup>8</sup>

With Alvin Poussaint’s and Robert Coles’ help he obtained a National Fellowship Fund for Harvard and accommodation in Cambridge, Massachusetts. They moved back to America in May 1976 when the draft amnesty came through. Other movement friends founded the “Bob Moses Fund” to help the struggling family—extended with daughter Malaika—as Moses completed his dissertation and Jemmott attended Harvard’s medical school. Moses hoped that his higher education would again enable him “to give service to my people as they take their place in the Nation and in the International community.” He found an avenue to do so in his work with Professor Willard Quine of Harvard’s Mathematics Department. In Quine’s suggestion that “mathematics gets off the ground through ordinary events described in ordinary language,” Moses found the scientific and philosophic framework for the work he had developed in the Tanzania school system. He could now start “fishing around for a kind of movement.”<sup>9</sup>

Moses found his new movement while tutoring his oldest daughter and a few classmates in algebra, which was not taught to inner city public school children. Rejecting the elitism of a system that handpicked students who qualified for tutoring, he pondered a means to reach *all* students, including those considered incapable of learning algebra. Unlike most (black) middle-class families, Moses had consciously put his children in public school because he wanted them to be exposed to “the culture that you have in an inner city.” He invested “a lot of time in their school to make sure that it worked for them.” The tutoring reemphasized his PS90, Mississippi, and Tanzania experiences: *all* their classmates needed to be looked upon as “an investment for the whole society.” The parallel with the 1960s was clear: “kids,” Moses said, “are being told that algebra is not for them just like sharecroppers were told that voting was not for them.” In the same way that the civil rights movement had found consensus around the idea of “one man, one vote,” Moses reasoned, the country could unite around the proposition that “all children can learn, and that all children deserve the best education.”<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Moses Inquiry, letter to Robert Coles, October 1975, William Heath Papers; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 94-95, 223-224; Moses interview Carson, 1982; Russell, *Black Genius*, 336.

<sup>8</sup> Moses interview Carson, 1982; Russell, *Black Genius*, 336; Julian Bond, interview by author, Washington DC, October 27, 2008; Morquand, “Up the Opportunity Ladder With Algebra,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, 1989, Box 135, Folder 31, Carl and Anne Braden Papers.

<sup>9</sup> Alvin Poussaint, email interview by author, October 2010; Moses interview Carson, 1982; Vincent Harding, letter, November 3, 1980, Box 135, Folder 31, Carl and Anne Braden Papers; Russell, *Black Genius*, 336-337; Moses Inquiry, letter to Robert Coles, October 1975, William Heath Papers; Bruce Watson, “A Freedom Summer Activist Becomes a Math Revolutionary,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, February 1996, 114-125; Julia Cass, “The Moses Factor,” *Mother Jones*, May/June 2002, <http://motherjones.com/politics/2002/05/moses-factor> (accessed May 12, 2008); Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 97.

<sup>10</sup> Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 93, 95-97; Wei-Ling Gong, “The Algebra Project,” *Southern Changes*, January 1991; Blake, *Children of the Movement*, 39.

With a prestigious MacArthur Genius grant, which Moses received in 1982, he developed the Algebra Project (AP). It is an alternative, bottom-up egalitarian educational program for underprivileged children that Moses, now in his late seventies, still directs. It is successfully implemented in thirteen states and has scientifically been proven to increase the number of college acceptances of underprivileged children. Spin-offs are the Young People's Project, initiated by Moses' own children, and Moses' current QECR-campaign, which tries to get quality education adopted as a constitutional right. The AP combines Quine's and Moses' Tanzania lessons of symbolic representations and games as educational tools with Ella Baker's and the Mississippi movement's notions of 'credentializing,' personhood, and ownership of learning. The "workshop style" of the Mississippi meetings became its model, Moses said, because "classrooms are just [like] meeting places" that can "be structured as a tool for empowering the people." He therefore sees the AP as "a continuation of what we did in the '60s." Participants are taught to see the language of math behind daily occurrences they meet in their everyday lives, like subway trips or making lemonade. The program meets them "where they are." Central to the participants' learning experience is team work, without which "moving the country into systematic change...becomes almost impossible." Its teachers, instructed in John Dewey's theories, seek consensus by involving the participants' parents, making it foremost "a community organizing project rather than a traditional program of school reform." Like SNCC-organizers they immerse themselves in the community's life, "learning its strengths, resources, concerns, and ways of conducting business."<sup>11</sup>

The AP is often hampered in the same way as SNCC was. Potential donors, now AP-board member Alvin Poussaint notes, are often frustrated with Moses' reluctance to do fundraising and with his rejection of donations that will not involve community people "in designing the research to be funded." Moreover, some participants find the emphasis on consensus through endless meetings exhausting. Having learned from the post-1964 period in Mississippi, however, Moses refuses to let 'hardliners' take over and takes his initiative from listening to community people even more. In fact, the AP instituted his insight from SNCC that locals have to take time to develop economic bases, networks, and organizations of their own. The YPP, for instance, is run by students who grew up in the AP and over time have found their own financial base.<sup>12</sup>

The AP brought Moses back to Mississippi, where he had returned only twice before. In 1982 he brought his family to the funeral of Amzie Moore, for whom he had set up a trust fund through the Bradens after Moore's health began to decline in 1980. Seven years later he attended a workshop in Jackson held to discuss movement workers' outrage over the newly released movie *Mississippi Burning*, which dealt with the Schwerner/Chaney/Goodman murders but turned the FBI into heroes. He saw Dave Dennis there for the first time in twenty four years, and convinced him of the need to implement the AP at Southern schools. In 1992 Dennis started the AP's Southern Initiative and has been its director ever since. In the mid-nineties Moses lived in Jackson four days a week to set up the AP at Brinkley Middle School and Lanier High School. Despite the movement's gains, Mississippi remained the poorest state in the country. According to *The Nation*, its black jobless rates rose from 7.9 to 15.9 percent between 1960

<sup>11</sup> Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, vii-xv, 3-22, 91-220; Theardis Nelson, *A Case Study Analysis of Bob Moses' Algebra Project: A Mathematics Program for African-American Middle School Boys* (PhD Dissertation, University of San Francisco, 1997); Jodi Wilgoren, "Algebra Project," *New York Times*, January 7, 2001; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 410-411; Blake, *Children of the Movement*, 39-41; Russell, *Black Genius*, 326-328, 335-343; Jessica T. Wahman, "'Fleshing Out Consensus': Radical Pragmatism, Civil Rights, and the Algebra Project," *Education & Culture* 25, no.1 (2009): 7-16. For more on the QECR-campaign see <http://www.qecr.org/> and Theresa Perry, et al. *Quality Education As A Constitutional Right*.

<sup>12</sup> Cass, "The Moses Factor," *Mother Jones*, May/June 2002, <http://motherjones.com/politics/2002/05/moses-factor> (accessed May 12, 2008); Watson, "A Freedom Summer Activist Becomes a Math Revolutionary," *Smithsonian Magazine*, February 1996. See also R. Moses, M. Kamii, S. Swap, and J. Howard, "The Algebra Project: Organizing in the Spirit of Ella," *Harvard Educational Review* 59 (November 1989): 423-443; Alexis Jetter, "Mississippi Learning," *New York Times Magazine*, February 21, 1993; Agger, *The Sixties at 40*, 185.



to 1990; the black population strength dropped by 7 percent; and integration triggered an exodus of white students from public schools. Jackson counted fewer than sixty whites among the 20,000 pupils in its public schools. Moses came back to Mississippi because that state was the best “theater where we can lift our program out of the ‘let’s teach math better’-box and take it to the country as a Civil Rights issue.” While there, he began to contact former movement comrades like C.C. Bryant and Dr. Anderson. His time in Mississippi became another period of healing as he gradually “began to feel that [Mississippi] was a good place for me” again.<sup>13</sup>

Moses also made amends with Joseph Rauh and John Doar. Having heard rumors that he was in Tanzania, the latter had sent letters to him seeking some sort of absolution. Doar had been “determined” to reach Moses because “I had such admiration for him that I wanted him to understand that he had his facts wrong.” Rauh’s letter went over the events at Atlantic City in detail. Because the letters were sent to the American Embassy Moses never replied for fear of drawing attention on him. But after his return Rauh visited Moses and, he recalled in 1979, “finally straightened out the chronology of [Atlantic City] and how he had been misled.” Moses and Doar also reconciled. In 2010 Doar said they had become “good friends.” In October 2011 Moses spoke at a gathering sponsored by the Justice Department to honor Doar and his legacy in the Civil Rights Division. The two cooperate now on Moses’ QECR-campaign.<sup>14</sup>

The AP returned Moses to mainstream acceptance. Since its inception he has received numerous awards and fellowships honoring his educational, civil, and human rights work. These included the *Esence*-award (1997); the Peace Award from the War Resisters League (1997); the Heinz Award for the Human Condition (1999); the Puffin/Nation Prize for Creative Citizenship (2001); the Mary Chase Award for American Democracy (2002); the James Conant Bryant Award for the U.S. Education Commission (2002); and the Alphonse Fletcher Fellowship (2005). He has received honorary degrees and visiting professorships from Swarthmore College, the University of Michigan, Cornell University, Princeton University, and the University of Florida. Even the Mississippi legislature acknowledged his contributions to the state by proclaiming May 2-3 ‘Bob Moses Day.’

Moses began reaching out to his former SNCC-comrades as well. Having avoided them for two decades, he takes part in reunions and uses his former networks to advance his AP and QECR-campaigns. Facing his past again was a difficult process. “For a long time, I didn’t read anything about myself,” he stated in 2004, but “I’ve gotten to the point where I can read things and not let them affect me.” Moreover, the AP’s success reaffirmed his faith in the philosophy for social change that he developed ‘on the ground, running’ in Mississippi. “The main thing is not to set out with grand projects,” Moses still adamantly proclaims wherever he goes. “Everything starts at your doorstep. Just get deeply involved in something... You throw a stone in one place and the ripples spread.”<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Cass, “The Moses Factor,” *Mother Jones*, May/June 2002, <http://motherjones.com/politics/2002/05/moses-factor> (accessed May 12, 2008); Bell Gale Chevigny, “The Fruits of Freedom Summer” and “Still It’s A Fight for Power,” *The Nation*, August 8-15 and August 22-29, 1994; Bob Moses to Anne Braden, October 9, 1980, Box 135, Folder 31, Carl and Anne Braden Papers; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, vii-xv.

<sup>14</sup> John Doar, interview by Blackside, Inc., November 15, 1985, for *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries; Robert Parris Moses, interview by Taylor Branch, August 11, 1983, Taylor Branch Papers; Mississippi’s ‘Freedom Summer’ Reviewed, conference October 30-November 2, 1979, transcript, Session 7, Folder 6, Mississippi’s ‘Freedom Summer’ Reviewed Collection; John Doar, conversation with author, Raleigh, NC, April 14, 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 613; Blake, *Children of the Movement*, 41; Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 411.



## 12. Conclusion

At the 1986 symposium where he outlaid his waves and ocean metaphor, Bob Moses already summarized the crux of and solution for the problems raging in the historiographic debates on the 1960s civil rights movement: “[I]n the movement there are great examples of organizers and their efforts, and this is not emphasized. It doesn’t make good copy, but it made the movement. It was the tissues and the bones, the inner structure of the movement. So these ideas about organizing versus leading, and the complex roles that people played both as organizers and leaders, need to be examined.” Considering Moses’ aversion for the projection of individuals, this plea was likely not an invitation to magnify his example. Yet precisely a close-up analysis of Moses’ activism demonstrated that the interrelation between a leader and the self-negating organizing approach that SNCC embodied can help explain how social change was generated by the 1960s civil rights movement. The recognition of the existence of a continuous and mutually reinforcing process of leading and organizing, in which individuals can simultaneously lead and follow, rendered the current polarizations in movement historiography unsatisfactory. Moses’ example showed that ‘either/or’ categories—continuity versus discontinuity, North versus South, local versus national, top-down versus bottom-up leadership, and organic versus cosmopolitan experiences—are to a large degree artificial constructions. They make debates on the movement needlessly complex and thereby confuse rather than clarify.<sup>1</sup>

Focusing on an individual actor within a broad movement underscores how history often developed without the grand designs historians read into it post facto. While Moses’ experiences in the North and cosmopolitan training in integrated institutions primed him for an understanding of organizational leadership based on consensus and self-negation, the development of his approach depended largely on his experiences in Mississippi. The situation he found there fostered the idea of forming small groups of fulltime workers who utilized a unique organizational culture based in personal relationships and democratic procedures. Because the workers risked their lives, it only seemed logical that they, and not some far away office, made the decisions. For everyone’s survival it was imperative that all agreed to what one got oneself into and that one could move flexibly based on one’s own and locals’ insights.

This group-centered leadership form reflected SNCC-workers’ desire of facilitating and projecting local leadership. The limited gains of the established civil rights organizations and the failures of SNCC’s direct action proponents had rendered (facilitating) grassroots leadership the only logical approach for attaining civil rights in the Mississippi context. This was true even if SNCC did not see this slow approach as its prime *raison d’être*—or Moses as its embodiment—for at least another year. Projecting individual leaders or organizations threatened the unity and scale of the Mississippi movement, while its survival in the state’s distinctive racist environment hinged on consensus and the involvement of as many participants as possible. The absence of visible leaders was also a safety measure. This way the movement would not fall victim to the destiny of its predecessors where movements were reduced or stopped completely after the banishment or assassination of its leaders. In addition, as Freedom Summer and SNCC’s Black Power period demonstrated, once the presence of the media and the projection of ‘outside’ workers took over leadership in the movement, locals withdrew. It was thus out of pragmatism, rather than sheer idealism, that Moses saw the dependency of social change on a common program for and by all blacks in the community’s social strata. Because locals risked their lives, they could only be moved to participate for a long period of time if they fully internalized the movement. This could merely be accomplished if fulltime workers operated on locals’, and not their own, agendas. As Moses said, an organizer “could not create consensus, an organizer had to find it.”<sup>2</sup>

Paradoxically, much of what made the 1960s civil rights movement and SNCC distinctive was

<sup>1</sup> Moses, “Commentary,” in *We Shall Overcome*, eds. Albert and Hoffman, 74.

<sup>2</sup> Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 85-87.

the emphasis on the individual act and the idea that the example was crucial. Such acts—especially of courage and self-sacrifice—contributed powerfully to a ‘movement’ culture. Martin Luther King pioneered the existentialist idea that leaders had to suffer alongside locals during protests. However, SNCC, and particularly Moses, took this idea to new levels. Moses’ presence in McComb occurred haphazardly by following the advice of experienced grassroots organizers like Amzie Moore and C.C. Bryant. Yet his decision to go to one of the most hardcore racist places in the nation and renounce all comfort on a long term basis gave him and SNCC great moral power. He thereby effectively changed the meaning of what ‘commitment’ to the struggle meant. The fact that he left behind a well-to-do life in Northern white middle class society underlined this level of commitment and made him an attractive figure for Northern movement supporters as well as its (lower educated) Southern participants. He promoted ‘moral leadership by example’ among Mississippi blacks by stressing that their individual deeds, like going to the courthouse, in itself were more significant than whether or not they managed to get registered to vote. As he indicated, workers’ primary goal became showing locals how they could move even if they were afraid. Their refusal to stop despite violence thus added to SNCC’s moral strength.

In this the changed interpretation of nonviolence from humiliation to something heroic as a result of the sit-ins and Freedom Rides played a significant role. Movement supporters’ romanticization of Moses’ composure during the Caston beating evidenced that this was a distinguishing feature of the 1960s movement. Yet this moral ethos could not be sustained indefinitely. The repetitive occurrence of violence and the inability to stop it exhausted workers and hastened their physical and mental burn-out. It also jaded sympathetic observers, which limited the effect of the tactic in the long run. Disillusionment was thus built-in as frustrated workers became increasingly radicalized, which spurred the transition to Black Power.

By moving from the North to the South, Moses exemplified another key aspect in SNCC’s novel *modus operandi*: the recognition that racism was a national phenomenon but that the base of the black freedom struggle had to be in the South. This negates ‘revisionist’ movement historians’ denial of Southern exceptionalism, but simultaneously validates their attempt at flattening geographical and local/national differences. Moses’ experiences, after all, authenticate both. Despite the many examples of civil rights activism in his home town, Moses always associated a sense of ‘movement’ with the South. The sit-ins spurred this interpretation. Once there, it became clear that Moses and his Southern colleagues in SNCC differed in their perceptions of each other as both adhered to stereotypical views of Northerners and Southerners. These differences were perceived as well as real. Especially Moses’ Northern encounters with the Old Left had influenced his stance on the “Communist issue,” whereas his Southern SNCC colleagues struggled with the topic. In addition, SNCC saw itself as a Southern-based enterprise and the role of Northerners in it as supportive from the start.

Within these North-South distinctions, Mississippi occupied an exceptional niche. The facts that SNCC did not have any contacts there and that Moses’ courage in going to get them was seen as extraordinary by Northern observers *and* his Southern SNCC co-workers underscores Mississippi’s exceptionalism. SNCC-workers’ experiences with racial violence and the almost absolute exclusion of blacks in the political process show the particular tenacity of the state’s oppressive climate. The decision to make Mississippi the centerpiece of SNCC’s strategy approach accordingly testifies to this logic. As scholars Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang contended: “The fact that Mississippi was widely considered ‘the belly of the beast’ of southern white racism was no figment of northern journalists’ imagination.” Downplaying this indeed does a disservice to Moses, COFO-workers, and the volunteers who risked—and some even sacrificed—their lives.<sup>3</sup>

Simultaneously, the problems of urban minorities never left Moses’ thinking. He saw his work in the South, especially his activity with the Democratic Party, as a prerequisite for a better quality of life

<sup>3</sup> Cha-Jua and Lang, “The ‘Long Movement’ as Vampire,” 283.

in the urban black North. Much of this insight is related to his direct knowledge of Harlem life, his father's lessons, and traveling northern black communities, combined with his ambivalent experiences in white middle-class institutions. These experiences made him susceptible to Amzie Moore and Ella Baker, and motivated his interest in economic issues and in spurring Southern blacks to better conditions at home rather than fleeing to the North.

Although some 'local people approach' historians argue that the southern movement was autonomous, Moses and SNCC succeeded in forging an allegiance between North and South in a way that strengthened rather than undermined grassroots leadership. The movement evolved out of southern black society, but SNCC also created new networks and resources based on the recognition that Northern involvement was vital for the survival of the movement. While there are always examples found of prior protests in Southern history, the movements existing in the late 1950s Deep South generally were holding operations. If not chased out or assassinated, many of its participants, like Amzie Moore, depended for their survival on outside assistance. A place like Mississippi reveals limitations in the usefulness of applying 'resource mobilization' theories: in the dangerous rural areas historically black institutions like the church generally refrained from movement involvement and often even thwarted attempts by COFO and SNCC. Across the South, however, SNCC did mobilize the network of historically black educational institutions. It also utilized the generally invisible 'extended family' networks within black communities to secure their workers' physical survival and to help get their programs started.

This, however, proved insufficient to forge social change on a long-term basis. SNCC saw itself forced to simultaneously tap other resources: the largely forgotten population of the Southern black poor and the growing segment of Northern white liberals, particularly students, which sought avenues to get involved in the movement. The latter was especially true after the 1963 Birmingham campaign and the March on Washington underscored civil rights as a national problem. In enterprises like the Freedom Vote and Freedom Summer white Northerners' and locals' needs then merged. Simultaneously these projects were based in the realization that the persistent racial violence in Mississippi could only be stopped through national interference. In this SNCC learned not to trust the federal government as an ally. But operating, alongside its slow grassroots organizing approach, from the recognition that media spectacles, particularly those involving Northern whites, could help bend its will. Moreover, the loss of outside funding in the form of the VEP spurred the desire for the mass-based 1964 summer project.

This North-South alliance accordingly blurs distinctions between top-down and bottom-up processes in explaining social change. While Moses responded to Mississippi blacks' needs, his behind-the-scenes work to translate them to Northerners with resources was a significant factor in SNCC's success in developing grassroots leadership. A large part of his job eventually became mediating between Southern blacks and their Northern allies. In this, Moses' skills and his contacts and experiences in the North played a key role. Good examples are his creation of the Literacy Project, his exposure of folk singers to Southern blacks, and his roles in the Greenwood book and commodities drives. Moses' effective relationship with Justice Department officials, particularly John Doar, depended on his constructive comportment. While sharing criticisms of the Department with other SNCC-workers, his overriding desire to help Mississippi blacks combined with his consensus-based personality spurred a workable and sympathetic relationship between federal officials and civil rights workers. This benefitted Southern blacks. It also depended on Moses' singular, personal mission to end racial violence, rooted in his guilt over Herbert Lee's death. This motivated him to use his influence, contacts, and skills to demand hearings of the Civil Rights Commission and getting cases of racial atrocities published through befriended journalists, like John Fisher.

With its dependency on educated Northern volunteers who augmented—not directed—locals' initiatives, Freedom Summer and the formation of the MFDP especially challenge simple dichotomies between top-down and bottom-up strategies. They thereby demonstrate most unambiguously that Moses' and SNCC's strategy of 'facilitation' went beyond the mere notion of using one's skills and power to facilitate local groups. The MFDP was an effort on the national level that complemented grassroots

initiatives in Mississippi and vice versa. Moses' past work had brought him to Atlantic City in a natural sequence of events. Because of SNCC's willingness to run risks others would not, he said, it had had "access to people that other people and organizations did not have" and thereby "the space to create a political organization out of voter registration." While the success of its Challenge depended on grassroots leadership in showing the Regulars' intent at exclusion and in building the MFDP at the base, in its preliminary stages it hinged on the presence of organizers with broad visions, particularly Moses'. Especially the people whose advice Moses followed and the degree of SNCC's structural support blur distinctions between him and SNCC as instigators or facilitators of social change. In addition, the MFDP's influential Northern allies pressured the administration into taking the Challenge seriously, lawyers like Rauh devised needed strategies, and the COFO-workers, aided by the volunteers, facilitated the successful execution of MFDP meetings. Furthermore, the COFO-document's admission that "without the influence of SNCC the delegation might have accepted the compromise" indicates that there are elements of truth in critics' accusations that the delegation reflected SNCC's deliberate shaping of it.<sup>4</sup>

The best example of this North/South and top-down/bottom-up symbiosis, however, is SNCC itself. To combat the oppression that had strangled Mississippi's earlier activists and to expand movement participation beyond the traditional leadership of the black middle class, locals *needed* SNCC to accelerate the degree, intensity, and effectiveness of their own protests. SNCC's approach of fulltime organizers—indigenous or not—who worked on subsistence pay, combined with its flexible structure and tapping of the groups of working-class blacks that established organizations ignored, proved more effective than the tiny field staff of the long-active NAACP. Unlike them, SNCC could thus *generate* a local movement in McComb and elsewhere by drawing 'ordinary' citizens *into* the movement; it had the time and numbers to show them, systematically, how to organize through workshops and meetings. Many, like Fannie Lou Hamer, were *ready* to participate, but proved much more responsive to organizers who became part of the community and stayed with them in the aftermath of protests. SNCC worked with 'ordinary' citizens alongside the middle class precisely *because* those earlier activists historically had been unable to create the beguiling sense of movement that SNCC with its fulltime body could. Other national organizations then followed SNCC's example.

What was thus new in the 1960s was the scale and character of support that national organizations afforded local ones, with SNCC setting the tone. The resources SNCC brought locals—exposure through workshops, education, and meetings; new ideas and strategies; skills and manpower—and the humble manner in which SNCC made them available proved crucial in attracting their sustained involvement. Yet in this Moses' example proved directive. Unlike SNCC's direct action proponents, Moses felt that his destiny was intertwined with that of black Mississippians. Seeing his prime allegiance to Amzie Moore instead of to an organization (SNCC), he was able to genuinely see locals as family and move along flexibly on their initiatives even if he did not always consider these wise. This familial relationship depended on trust and equality, built through patience, listening, and the willingness to suffer the same fate. As historian Charles Payne observed, building these relationships then became SNCC's primary job, and engaging in it a political act in itself that bolstered locals' confidence. Workers in turn noticed they could learn from locals regardless of their level of education, which spurred their faith in developing grassroots leadership. Moses' personal fascination with exposure, ownership in learning, and 'credentials' accelerated this development. The changed format of mass meetings into 'training grounds' for *everyone* present, the creation of literacy material which met locals 'where they were,' and letting locals do his speaking or writing for him attest to this. While SNCC often used older tactics—like meetings, voter registration drives, citizenship schools, the running of black candidates for office, and direct aid—its emphasis on turning these efforts into organizing

<sup>4</sup> Robert Moses, interviewed by Blackside, Inc., May 19, 1986, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 80-81; Report on MFDP, no date (likely Fall 1964), Folder 1, Mendy Samstein Papers.



tools *in themselves* represented a new dimension in the freedom struggle. They effectively expanded movement participation and increased the depth of participants' commitment.

The presence of SNCC-workers in itself was another catalyst for locals, especially if their class or educational backgrounds or personalities represented something unique. Most locals were eager to 'grow' and feel connected to a world outside their own. SNCC then catered to this inherent desire with its systematic provisions of workshops and 'leadership trainings' inside and outside the state. As Moses acknowledged, for locals and especially native students who joined SNCC, the organization served as a 'Petri dish' from which their own sense of themselves evolved. The origins of the McComb march stand as testimony. Native workers often started and sustained projects without Moses' presence and locals and workers merged in mutually reinforcing roles. Because of the small-scale character of the projects, this could occur without too many incidents of overt or subtle manipulation. Simultaneously, the over-presence of workers, as in Greenwood and during Freedom Summer, stifled locals' development. This was especially true if they did not apply their skills in humility due to time constraints. Yet until the move into politics rendered unitary concepts of 'the people' and interests between 'the people' and SNCC-workers void, SNCC's self-abdicating, consensus-based leadership approach effectively complemented the methods of prior activists.

The same 'either/or' merger is found in SNCC itself. It adopted a self-negating organizing approach for its internal dealings, but in practice SNCC-workers paradoxically felt a great need for leadership, and eventually, structure. This is particularly evident from the universal projection of leadership onto Moses. In this, Moses' individual talents and background played an important role. His intrinsically shy character and soft speech fitted his message of self-effacing leadership. It thereby added to his charisma and the creation of what became known as the 'Bob Moses mystique.' His intellectual training combined with his ability to not sound patronizing and his 'outsider' status made him an attractive figure for Northern white liberals and Southern blacks alike. The fact that he had academic titles mattered to both even if he did not flaunt his credentials. So did his boldness, which owed a large part to his Northern background, his family's struggles to become part of the middle class, and his experiences in white institutions. The latter had unleashed a sense of entitlement and aspirations in him that many of his Southern colleagues to a larger degree had been forced to contain.

Moses mostly derived his influence from his keen sense of direction and what one worker termed "the sheer degree of thought [he] put into creating" the Mississippi movement. While he combined his organic and cosmopolitan experiences into a singular philosophy that movement participants could not always follow—like his merger with the anti-war movement—it was his breadth of vision that impressed other workers. Due to his age and cosmopolitan training he had a more rounded conception of what they were struggling for, which his encounters with the Atlanta student movement and SNCC's direct action proponents in McComb highlighted. His suggestive manner of providing advice and his sheer example in McComb helped spur SNCC's transition from a campus-based student movement centered on integrating (urban) public facilities to a group of fulltime organizers working with the rural poor on voter registration in the Deep South. As charismatic as many SNCC-workers considered him to be, without this sense of purpose and ability to explain it in a way that crossed racial, geographical, and class boundaries, he for instance would not have been able to convince SNCC to instigate Freedom Summer.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, unlike the historical depiction of Moses as an "unmitigated idealist," in reality he was an effective 'hands-on' organizer. This was already evident from the way he collected contacts for SNCC in Mississippi in 1960 and how he handled SCLC's fundraiser mailing. Yet within SCLC's top-down structure his talents went unnoticed, which suggests a causal connection between organizational culture and individuals' ability within it to thrive. He executed a significant number of behind-the-scenes

<sup>5</sup> Cagin and Dray, *We Are Not Afraid*, 179.

responsibilities which were crucial for SNCC's and COFO's daily operations. As one early 1960s SNCC-report recognized: "In Mississippi there [exists] among the band of brothers a spirit of trust in the administrative ability of Moses...to get the programs off the ground." This included setting up budgets; arranging office spaces and housing for workers; networking; checking up on worker's needs and arranging transfers when necessary; filing reports; giving (strategy) advice; developing fundraising ideas; screening volunteers; translating Mississippi locals' needs to outsiders with influence and resources; and being the main 'contact man' in Mississippi. The lengths he went to inside and outside the state to secure protection for locals and workers during Freedom Summer stand as additional proof. In fact, Moses even derived a large part of his influence from his wide-ranging preparations and the thought he put into projects beforehand. Workers *needed* someone whose pragmatic capabilities they could trust because often their physical and mental survival depended on it; only rarely are people willing to risk life and limb for someone's charisma alone. Still, his example in risking life and limb *with them* helped others in reaching the courage to risk theirs.<sup>6</sup>

Moses' unassuming personality and pragmatic reminders to focus on what *was* under workers' control, often helped smooth over conflicts with workers from other civil rights organizations, with locals, and within SNCC. His emphasis on seeking consensus in SNCC's debates on nonviolence versus self-defense and in the conflicts with the volunteers during the Freedom Vote, Freedom Summer, and after, evidenced this. In this, workers indicated that they particularly appreciated his ability to see the broader picture in motivating them to continue their work and reaching out to their colleagues. Field workers as well as the Atlanta office (James Forman in particular) actually expected and *demand*ed of him that he played this intermediary role. Moses occasionally even acted as a disciplinarian. He did so at times because the Atlanta office ordered it and at others of his own accord because he recognized that certain degrees of discipline were needed for effective organizing. Yet Moses differed from most of his colleagues in approaching discipline as another organizing tool that could help individuals grow and reach their full potential rather than as a means for expediency.

Judgments on the effectiveness of SNCC's organizational leadership approach, however, should not be cast in 'either/or' terms. Participatory democracy was an ideal and, as such, could never exist in pure form; it could only be approximated. It was precisely this striving for an ideal that presented another significant part of what gave SNCC its great moral power, but it was unavoidable that this moral ethos could not be sustained forever. As historian Emily Stoper indicated, this paradox of simultaneously rejecting and desiring leadership inevitably hampered its future effectiveness. Its preoccupations with wanting to attain its redemptive qualities only accelerated awareness of workers' differences and increasingly conflicted with its growing desire to let its budding nationalist political views determine its direction. Similarly, it was inevitable that Moses' success invited his projection.

Combined with the passage of the Voting Rights Act, which paradoxically led to a 'crisis of victory' that left SNCC-workers unsure of how to proceed, SNCC's inherent inability to keep up its moral ethos demonstrates the necessity of recognizing 'ends'—or rather 'breaks' or 'transitions'—in movements despite continuities in players, objectives, organizational longevity, or methods. In 1968, when James Forman was still trying to build SNCC as a mass-based organization by forging political alliances with the Black Panther Party and other (pro-)black organizations, Ella Baker recognized the occurrence of a break in movement continuity aptly: "I don't think that enough was [done by SNCC], and yet I would have to qualify this by saying that what was done maybe was as much as could be expected."<sup>7</sup>

Moses essentially acknowledged this transition period too when he left SNCC. Not only disillusion exacerbated by physical and mental exhaustion prompted his departure, but the common-

<sup>6</sup> "Paper on the Salary Structure of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee," no date (likely winter 1962-1963), Box 2, Folder 1, Samuel Walker Papers.

<sup>7</sup> Ella Baker, interview by John Britton, June 19, 1968, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University.

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sense recognition that his utility in the organization had run out. Moses had joined SNCC in search of a group of kindred souls, but he could no longer identify with the SNCC of 1965. He had been willing to continue organizing on the same, slow organizing approach from before Freedom Summer. But most of his colleagues could not, leading to their growing openness to Forman's bureaucratization plans and Black Power. While Moses did not have any problems with black nationalism on its surface intent, the organizing approach adopted by SNCC's Black Power proponents deviated too much from his own. In this climate the assets Moses brought the organization—humility in leadership and a long-range view based in locals' needs—had no place; they opposed the overriding longing for internal bureaucratization and the external desire for immediate political power. Had he tried to institutionalize his views—and become what he abhorred—whatever value to SNCC he could have had would have been lost. Moreover, Moses' approach depended on flexibility, in which the recognition of 'end' points is inherent too. In effect, Moses' boat metaphor in his 1964 Waveland position paper—which called to determine SNCC's strategies on the forever altering social contexts in which they worked rather than (past) models or theories—foreshadowed the wisdom sociologists Francis Fox Piven and Richard Cloward demonstrated in 1979: "If there is a genius in organizing, it is the capacity to sense what is possible for people to do under given conditions...Both the limitations and opportunities for mass protest are shaped by social conditions." This implies the recognition of an end to one's utility, too.<sup>8</sup>

The example of Moses' activism thus shows that the recognition of a passage between the wave and the ocean as well as between 'classical' and 'revisionist' approaches in civil rights movement historiography is needed: he illustrates the significance of his and SNCC's self-negating leadership approach in developing grassroots leadership *and* the significance of the individual in generating social change. Within the multiple factors involved in understanding the production of social change, movement historians must recognize the importance of fulltime facilitation of 'local people,' particularly by 'outsiders' like Moses, which proved crucial. Doing so makes it possible to clarify what has become an overly complex and overly schematic historiographical debate. A recognition that Moses was a creative instigator of social change does nothing to detract from his assertion that "it was when sharecroppers, day laborers, and domestic workers found their voice...that the Mississippi political game was really over."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Francis Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 32, 36, in *Local People*, Dittmer, 429.

<sup>9</sup> Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 20.



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# Dutch Summary / Samenvatting

## van het proefschrift

### Een *Veelvoud* Aan Leiders? Robert Parris Moses, SNCC, en Leiderschap in het Genereren van Maatschappelijke Verandering tijdens de Amerikaanse Burgerrechtenbeweging, 1960-1965

door

Laura Visser-Maessen

Dit proefschrift tracht bij te dragen aan de verklaringen voor de totstandkoming van maatschappelijke verandering van Afro-Amerikanen in de jaren '60 van de vorige eeuw. Het is een analyse van de relatie tussen 'fulltime' burgerrechtenactivisten en de lokale bevolking die ze probeerden te helpen hun gelijke rechten te behalen. Hierin spitst dit onderzoek zich toe op de interactie tussen de zwarte activist Robert Parris Moses (geb. 1935) en de studentenorganisatie SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) enerzijds en de zwarte populatie van Mississippi anderzijds, in de jaren 1960-1965. In het historisch debat hebben geschiedkundigen deze veranderingen namelijk vooral behandeld als het *top down* resultaat van wettelijke doorbraken, die waren geforceerd door professionele organisaties en nationale leiders zoals Martin Luther King. In deze benadering werd de periode 1955-1965 gezien als een unieke periode in de geschiedenis. Door het belang van de 'gewone' lokale bevolking naar voren te schuiven zijn meer recente academici maatschappelijke verandering echter vooral gaan zien als een *bottom-up* proces van lokaal activisme verspreid op landelijk niveau, waarbij nationale organisaties en leiders slechts een faciliterende rol is toegekend. Zo benadrukken ze dat de oorsprong en het succes van de burgerrechtenbeweging van de jaren zestig te vinden is in historische 'zwarte' instituten zoals de kerk en educatieve instanties. Sommigen beargumenteren zelfs dat de beweging in het Noorden een gelijkwaardige variant van de Zuidelijke burgerrechtenbeweging was. Hiermee hebben zij aangetoond dat de vrijheidsstrijd wortels had in de periode ver voor 1955 en lang na 1965 voortduurde. Bovendien lieten ze zien dat deze strijd een veelvoud aan vertegenwoordigers, doeleinden, en strategieën kende.

Deze 'revisionistische' historici hebben met hun zogenaamde 'local people approach' en het concept van de 'long civil rights movement' een zeer waardevolle bijdrage geleverd aan dit historisch debat, maar een deel van hen is daarin doorgeschoten. Waar 'klassieke' historici teveel nadruk legden op de uitzonderlijkheid van het tijdperk 1955-1965 en de rol van individuele leiders, doen deze academici juist het tegenovergestelde. Door te stellen dat de zwarte vrijheidsstrijd een aaneengeschakelde periode van lokaal activisme is met minieme invloed van buitenaf, impliceren deze academici immers dat er nauwelijks sprake is van scherpe overgangen in de geschiedenis en van periodes met elk hun unieke eigenschappen, mogelijkheden en beperkingen. Hoewel er altijd voorbeelden van protest zijn te vinden in de geschiedenis is er per slot van rekening wel degelijk verschil in de mate, intensiteit, en effectiviteit van burgeractivisme door de jaren heen. De jaren zestig werden zelfs gekenmerkt door ongekennde ideeën en methodes. Met name de mate en het karakter van de steun van nationale organisaties aan lokale bewegingen was exceptioneel. Door dit te bagatelliseren impliceren deze 'revisionistische' historici echter dat zwarten in het Zuiden zelf beschikten over voldoende organisatorische, financiële, en politieke middelen om hun strijd effectief te voeren met minimale steun van buitenaf, terwijl dit niet het geval was. Dit proefschrift beargumenteert dat de aanwezigheid van 'fulltime' activisten die de lokale bevolking, zij het bescheiden, faciliteerden en de participatie van het Noorden van doorslaggevend belang waren voor het voortbestaan en welslagen van de burgerrechtenbeweging in de jaren zestig. Dit gold ook voor de aanwezigheid van

activisten wier ideeën en visies van de strijd niet alleen beïnvloed waren door hun eigen omgeving maar ook door invloeden van buitenaf.

Deze analyse van het activisme van Bob Moses en SNCC ondersteunt deze aanname. Moses, een van de voornaamste personen in het democratische groepsleiderschap model dat SNCC propageerde, overbrugt namelijk het gat tussen *top-down*- en *bottom-up*-leiderschap: hij illustreert zowel het belang van de ontwikkeling van lokaal leiderschap als de waarde van het individu in de totstandkoming van maatschappelijke verandering. Als aanvulling op de ‘community mobilizing tradition’ die King en zijn organisatie SCLC praktiseerden, wijdden hij en SNCC zich aan de ‘community organizing tradition.’ Waar de eersten zich richtten op grootschalige maar kortstondige mediagerichte gebeurtenissen zoals protestmarsen, benadrukten de laatstgenoemde het ontwikkelen van lokale initiatieven en lokaal leiderschap op de lange termijn. Hierin stelden SNCC en Moses zich op als bescheiden volgers en niet als leiders van de lokale bevolking. Dit lukte wonderbaarlijk goed doordat zij een organisatiemethode ontwikkelden waarbij burgerrechtvoorstanders uit het Noorden en Zuiden samenwerkten op een manier die lokaal leiderschap versterkte in plaats van ondermijnde. Dit onderzoek naar het proces van faciliteren door Moses en SNCC laat vervolgens zien dat, naast lokaal leiderschap, deze Noord-Zuid alliantie en de eigenschappen van individuele leiders verschil uitmaakten voor het welslagen van zowel de nationale burgerrechtenbeweging als de lokale beweging in Mississippi. Hoewel Moses zich wegcijferde maakte deze houding hem juist een dermate geliefd leider dat aan zijn persoon mythische proporties werden toegekend. Ondanks hun publieke imago ging de inmenging van Moses en SNCC achter de schermen bovendien vaak verder dan alleen het aanwenden van hun vaardigheden en connecties ten behoeve van de lokale bevolking.

Deze erkenning van een continuen wederzijds beïnvloedbaar proces waarin individuentegelijkertijd kunnen leiden *en* volgen maakt de huidige polarisaties in de historiografie van de burgerrechtenbeweging ontoereikend. Het voorbeeld van Moses laat zien dat de genoemde tegenstellingen—continuïteit vs. discontinuïteit, Noord vs. Zuid, lokaal vs. nationaal, *top-down* vs. *bottom-up* leiderschap, en inheemse vs. invloeden van buitenaf—grotendeels kunstmatig zijn en daardoor historiografische debatten onnodig complex maken. Het pleit er dan ook voor om ‘klassieke’ en ‘revisionistische’ interpretaties naar elkaar toe te buigen om maatschappelijke verandering te verklaren. De uiteenzetting van Moses’ activiteiten in dit proefschrift—de meest gedetailleerde tot nog toe—laat eveneens zien dat dit noodzakelijk is om zijn concrete bijdrage aan de vrijheidsstrijd op de juiste waarde te schatten: hij was noch de existentiële held en idealist die ‘klassieke’ academici en met name blanke medestanders hebben beschreven, noch de nederige dienaar van de lokale bevolking uit ‘revisionistische’ beschrijvingen.

Net als elk mens had Moses zijn eigen visies, vooropgezette ideeën, en achtergrond invloeden die zijn beslissingen in Mississippi mede bepaalden. In zijn geval ging het hierbij altijd om een combinatie van ‘zwarte’ invloeden en ideeën van buitenaf. Moses groeide op in Harlem tijdens de Depressie en de oorlogsjaren, waar hij met lede ogen aanzag hoe zijn ouders het hoofd boven water probeerden te houden. Tegelijkertijd leerden ze hem de waarde van de ‘gewone’ mens, ieders intrinsieke vermogen tot zelfdeterminatie, en het belang van luisteren naar anderen en blootstelling aan zoveel mogelijk contacten en ideeën. Zijn identificatie met deze principes werden versterkt door zijn kosmopolitische opleidingen aan ‘blanke’ elitescholen zoals Stuyvesant high school en Hamilton College, waar hij in aanraking kwam met ‘linkse’ opvattingen. Hij bezocht socialistische zomerkampen en radicale zangers als Pete Seeger, en verslond de existentiële filosofieën van Albert Camus. Vooral Camus’ ideeën over ‘moral leadership by example’ en de noodzaak om geen slachtoffer maar ook geen beul te zijn beïnvloedden hem. Via de Quakers en de American Friends Service Committee identificeerde hij zich tevens met het pacifisme en bezocht hij internationale vrijwilligerskampen in Europa en Japan, waar hij ook het Boeddhisme bestudeerde. Hoewel hij zich altijd op de achtergrond hield had hij een voortdurende drang naar sociale activiteiten en contact met gelijkgestemden.

Laatstgenoemden vond hij in SNCC, de studentenorganisatie die in 1960 werd opgericht nadat de sit-ins van dat jaar een nationaal netwerk van student-activisten blootlegden dat behoefte had aan coördinatie. In hen zag Moses zijn idealen van geweldloos doch actief verzet tegen onrecht—geen slachtoffer noch beul—verwezenlijkt. SNCC's doel was het coördineren van lokale studentenbewegingen, die zelf op basis van consensus het beleid bepaalden, in plaats van een centraal beleid te volgen van SNCC's hoofdkantoor in Atlanta. Hij sloot zich bij hen aan nadat hij, geïnspireerd door de sit-ins, in de zomer van 1960 naar Atlanta trok als vrijwilliger bij King's SCLC, maar zich in deze bureaucratische organisatie niet gewaardeerd voelde. De zwarte activiste Ella Baker, die op het punt stond bij SCLC te vertrekken, moedigde zijn intrinsieke voorkeur voor een begrip van organisatorisch leiderschap gebaseerd op consensus en zelfnegatie aan. Vooral haar opvatting 'strong people don't need strong leaders' vormde een prominent onderdeel van zijn latere filosofie als burgerrechtenactivist.

Moses' intrinsieke voorkeuren kregen echter pas concrete vorm en betekenis toen hij die zomer, tijdens een rondreis namens SNCC door het Zuiden, in Mississippi de zwarte activist Amzie Moore ontmoette, en een jaar later zijn eerste voting rights campagne opzette in het plaatsje McComb. De situatie die hij daar aantrof voedde zijn idee van het vormen van kleine groepjes van 'fulltime' veelal jonge lokale activisten die bij de lokale bevolking gingen wonen voor langdurige periodes voor een salaris van minder dan \$10 per week. Zij bouwden vervolgens persoonlijk relaties op met inwoners van allerlei sociale achtergronden en stelden de hulpmiddelen—vaardigheden, mankracht, informatie—ter beschikking die de lokale bevolking ontbeerde om hun vrijheidsstrijd voort te zetten. In de formatie van COFO (Council of Federated Organizations), een in 1962 gevormd uniek samenwerkingsverband van alle lokale en nationale burgerrechtenorganisaties in de staat onder leiding van de lokale zwarte bevolking, vond Moses een instrument om zijn methode over heel Mississippi te verspreiden.

Om dit te bewerkstelligen hingen deze activisten een unieke organisatorische cultuur aan gebaseerd op persoonlijke relaties en democratische procedures. Dit had zowel een ideologische als puur pragmatische grondslag. Omdat de activisten hun levens riskeerden was het logisch dat zij, en niet het hoofdkantoor mijlenver weg zoals bij de meeste bestaande organisaties, het beleid ter plaatse bepaalden en dat ze flexibel konden voortbewegen gebaseerd op hun eigen inzicht en dat van de lokale bevolking. Bovendien bleek het faciliteren van lokaal leiderschap met een strategie rondom het stemrecht de enige realistische aanpak voor de vrijheidsstrijd in de context van Mississippi. Andere vormen van protest, met name de ontwrichtende 'nonviolent direct action' demonstraties zoals de sit-ins van SNCC-activisten in andere staten, werden door de lokale autoriteiten gewelddadig neergeslagen of bleken onhoudbaar door de hoge kosten van borgsommen. In tegenstelling tot het verkrijgen van het stemrecht verdeelde 'direct action' de zwarte gemeenschap, die traditioneel geleid werd door conservatieve middenklasse leiders die noch hun relaties met de heersende blanke elite noch hun eigen status binnen de zwarte gemeenschap wilde verliezen. Vanwege het extreem zware verzet van de lokale autoriteiten was eenheid en consensus cruciaal om het voortbestaan van de fragiele burgerrechtenbeweging in Mississippi te garanderen, en het projecteren van individuele leiders of organisaties die hun programma aan de lokale bevolking oplegden bedreigde dit. Immers, aangezien iets simpels als het registreren om te stemmen zelfs al kon resulteren in het verlies van huis, baan of leven, kon de deelname van de lokale bevolking aan de burgerrechtenbeweging op lange termijn alleen bewerkstelligd worden als zij zich de beweging volledig eigen maakten. Daarnaast was de afwezigheid van zichtbare leiders ook een pragmatische veiligheidsmaatregel zodat de beweging niet, zoals in de jaren '50, gehinderd of zelfs gestopt zou worden door het uitschakelen van haar leiders.

Tegelijkertijd waren de individuele daad, vooral van lef en zelfopoffering, en het idee dat het voorbeeld cruciaal was prominente onderdelen van wat de burgerrechtenbeweging van de jaren zestig onderscheidde van haar voorgangers. Martin Luther King maakte dit existentiële idee dat leiders hetzelfde lot moesten ondergaan als hun volgelingen populair, maar SNCC en Moses brachten het idee van wat toewijding aan de vrijheidsstrijd betekende tot nieuwe hoogtes. Hoewel Moses' aanwezigheid in McComb toevalligerwijs tot stand kwam door het volgen van het advies van ervaren lokale activisten zoals Moore,

gaf zijn beslissing om naar een van de gevaarlijkste plaatsen van het land te gaan hem en SNCC groot moreel charisma. Bovendien verruilde hij een goed leven in de blanke middenklasse van het Noorden voor een verblijf bij de lokale zwarte bevolking in het Zuiden en deelde jarenlang hun armoede en gevaar. Dit feit maakte hem een romantisch figuur voor zowel Noordelijke als voor de veelal lager opgeleide Zuidelijke burgerrechtensympathisanten. Tegenover de lokale zwarte bevolking propageerde hij hetzelfde idee dat hun individuele daden, zoals een bezoek aan de rechtbank om zich te laten registreren, in zichzelf van groter belang was dan of ze in hun poging zouden slagen. Laten zien dat men actie kon ondernemen, hoe klein ook, ondanks angst en geweld speelde vervolgens een grote rol in het openstaan van zwarten voor langdurige deelname aan de vrijheidsstrijd. De veranderde betekenis van geweldloosheid als zwakte naar iets heroïsch door de sit-ins en Freedom Rides versterkte dit. Ondanks dat deze morele ethos niet eeuwig kon worden volgehouden—de constante geweldsincidenten en de onmacht deze te stoppen versnelde de burn-out van activisten en maakte hen vatbaarder voor het idee van Black Power—was het voor lange tijd een ongekend en effectief kenmerk van de burgerrechtenbeweging van de jaren zestig.

Door van het Noorden naar het Zuiden te verhuizen problematiseert Moses ook het historisch debat omtrent de relatie tussen de Noordelijke en Zuidelijke vrijheidsstrijd. Hij erkende dat racisme een nationaal probleem was, maar dat de basis van de burgerrechtenbeweging in het Zuiden lag. Dit is zowel een ontkrachting als een bevestiging van het idee dat het Zuiden een exceptioneel onderdeel van de zwarte vrijheidsstrijd vormde; Moses' ervaringen ondersteunen beide interpretaties. Ondanks de vele voorbeelden van burgerrechtenactivisme in New York en elders in het Noorden associeerde hij bijvoorbeeld elk idee van een 'beweging' met het Zuiden. Eenmaal daar werd ook duidelijk dat Moses en zijn collega's in SNCC die opgegroeid waren in het Zuiden niet alleen stereotype ideeën van Noordelingen en Zuiderlingen aanhingen maar dat ze ook daadwerkelijk verschilden. Met name de ervaringen die Moses had opgedaan met socialistische ideeën onderscheidde hem. Waar de meeste van zijn Zuidelijke collega's moeite hadden met het toelaten van al dan niet aantoonbare sympathisanten van het communisme pleitte Moses volop voor samenwerking met een ieder die de vrijheidsstrijd kon helpen ongeacht politieke voorkeur, zoals de controversiële blanke activisten Carl en Anne Braden en de organisatie de National Lawyers' Guild. Bovendien werd zijn lef om naar Mississippi te gaan als buitengewoon betiteld door zowel Noordelijke sympathisanten als zijn Zuidelijke collega's in SNCC.

Tegelijkertijd echter zag Moses zijn werk in het Zuiden als een voorwaarde voor het behalen van een betere levensstandaard voor zwarten in het Noorden; de situatie van de minderheden in de Noordelijke steden zou in ieder geval niet kunnen verbeteren zolang de krachtige Zuidelijke elite, de zogenaamde Dixiecrats, hun grip op de nationale Democratische Partij behielden. Hun macht kon echter alleen gebroken worden in hun thuisbasis—het Zuiden. Inzicht in deze problematiek verkreeg Moses door zijn eigen ervaringen in Harlem, het luisteren naar zijn vader en anderen in diens sociale netwerk, het rondreizen door Noordelijke zwarte gemeenschappen zoals Chicago en Detroit als tiener, en door zijn tegenstrijdige ervaringen in blanke middenklasse instellingen. Dit wakkerde zijn interesse aan voor het bewerkstelligen van economische programma's voor zwarten en in het aanmoedigen van zwarten in het Zuiden om hun situatie aldaar te verbeteren omdat vluchten naar het Noorden geen oplossing was.

Moses' ervaringen in Mississippi en zijn relaties met ervaren lokale activisten zoals Moore leerden hem ook dat de basis van de burgerrechtenbeweging voortkwam uit de Zuiderse zwarte samenleving, maar dat het noodzakelijk was om daarnaast nieuwe netwerken en hulpmiddelen te creëren gebaseerd op de erkenning dat participatie van het Noorden cruciaal was voor het voortbestaan van de burgerrechtenbeweging. Hoewel 'revisionistische' academici de Zuidelijke vrijheidsstrijd als autonoom zien, was de inmenging van buitenaf niet slechts 'ondersteunend' maar vitaal: de lokale bewegingen die in de jaren vijftig bestonden in het Diepe Zuiden waren over het algemeen niet meer dan zogenaamde 'holding operations.' Als ze al niet weggejaagd of vermoord waren, was het merendeel van haar deelnemers desalniettemin voor hun voortbestaan nagenoeg afhankelijk van (financiële) hulp van buitenaf, zoals van



nationale organisaties zoals de NAACP of de door Baker medeopgerichte groep In Friendship. In een plek als Mississippi blijkt bovendien dat de pijlers van 'revisionistische' historici voor de oorsprong van de vrijheidsstrijd—de zwarte kerk en historisch zwarte educatieve instellingen—nauwelijks toepasbaar zijn. Met name in de gevaarlijke landelijke gebieden weigerden deze zich namelijk in de strijd te mengen, en probeerden ze vaak zelfs alle pogingen daartoe van SNCC en COFO te ondermijnen.

Hoewel Moses en SNCC het netwerk van zwarte studenten in het Zuiden wisten te mobiliseren en gretig gebruik maakten van de onzichtbare 'extended family' netwerken binnen de zwarte gemeenschap om hun fysieke veiligheid te waarborgen en programma's van de grond te krijgen, was dit lang niet voldoende om maatschappelijke verandering op de lange termijn te creëren. Zij zagen zich daardoor gedwongen om tegelijkertijd gebruik te maken van bronnen die de bestaande burgerrechtenorganisaties over het algemeen hadden verwaarloosd: de grotendeels vergeten arme zwarten uit het Zuiden en het groeiende aantal blanke liberalen uit het Noorden die een toegang tot de burgerrechtenbeweging zochten. Dit laatste aantal groeide vooral nadat de gewelddadige demonstraties in Birmingham en de March on Washington in 1963 benadrukten dat de strijd om burgerrechten een nationaal probleem was. Moses en SNCC maakten van deze blanke interesse gebruik tijdens de Freedom Vote in 1963 en de Freedom Summer in 1964. In deze campagnes kwamen de behoeftes van de lokale bevolking in Mississippi en die van blanke Noordelingen samen. Tijdens de ingenieuze Freedom Vote, waarin de zwarte bevolking onofficieel kon stemmen op hun eigen zwarte kandidaten voor het gouverneurschap, kon de campagne door de hele staat verspreid worden met behulp van ongeveer honderd blanke studenten. Freedom Summer was een ambitieus project waarbij over de hele staat burgerrechtenprogramma's variërend van stemmen werven, Freedom Schools en Freedom Centers tot het realiseren van een eigen politieke partij (de MFDP, Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party) werden opgezet. Ook hier werd gebruik gemaakt van ongeveer achthonderd, over het algemeen rijke blanke studenten uit het Noorden. Tegelijkertijd hadden de activisten ook weinig andere keus: ze waren uitgeput, de nationale VEP (Voting Education Project) had besloten hen niet meer financieel te ondersteunen omdat ze vond dat het onmogelijk was in Mississippi burgerrechten te verkrijgen, en het was duidelijk dat het onophoudelijke raciale geweld in de staat alleen gestopt kon worden door nationale interventie. SNCC had geleerd van het twijfelachtige optreden van de federale overheid Mississippi, in Greenwood in het bijzonder, dat ook de laatstgenoemde geen bondgenoot was, maar dat de federale overheid wel vatbaar was voor media-spektakels. Dit bleek zeker zo te zijn wanneer blanken het slachtoffer waren, zoals de moord op drie activisten tijdens Freedom Summer pijnlijk duidelijk maakte. Ze kregen gelijk: de alles ontwrichtende Freedom Summer dwong de federale overheid tot ingrijpen, waardoor de lokale overheden en elite zich gematigder opstelden en een einde maakten aan de heerschappij van extremistische organisaties zoals de Ku Klux Klan.

Met het inzetten van hoog opgeleide blanke vrijwilligers bemoeilijken vooral Freedom Summer en de MFDP een simpele tweedeling tussen *top-down*- en *bottom-up*-leiderschap. Hoewel zij lokale initiatieven aanvulden—niet dirigeerden—laten ze onmiskenbaar zien dat de facilitatie-strategie van Moses en SNCC verder ging dan alleen het aanwenden van hun vaardigheden en invloed ten behoeve van de lokale bevolking. De MFDP was bijvoorbeeld ontworpen als een blijvend instrument om lokaal leiderschap mogelijk te maken, maar richtte zich in de zomer van 1964 eveneens op de federale overheid middels de zogenaamde 'seating Challenge' tijdens de Nationale Democratische Conventie (DNC). De oorspronkelijke Democratische Partij in Mississippi (de 'Regulars') koos haar afgevaardigden voor de DNC, die daar de kandidaat voor de presidentiële verkiezingen van dat jaar zouden kiezen, tijdens bijeenkomsten op district-, county-, en staatsniveau. Zwarten probeerden om ook hun stem uit te brengen, maar aangezien ze, zoals verwacht, werden buitengesloten konden ze volgens de Partijregels het partijapparaat van de Regulars overnemen en hun eigen verkiezingen houden. Omdat hun verkiezingen wel open waren voor alle stemgerechtigden ongeacht afkomst of opleidingsniveau konden ze daarna bij de DNC eisen dat de zitplaatsen (en het bijbehorende kiesrecht) van de Regulars hen toebehoorden. Hun succes was dus afhankelijk van de bereidheid van de lokale bevolking om aan te tonen dat de Regulars hen buitensloten

en om de MFDP op te bouwen. Maar de voorbereidende fases waren echter vooral afhankelijk van de aanwezigheid van activisten met een brede visie, met name die van Moses. Vooral de mensen wier advies Moses opvolgde en de mate waarin SNCC de MFDP structureel ondersteunde vervagen het conventionele onderscheid tussen hem en SNCC als aanstichters of als ondersteuners van maatschappelijke verandering. Bovendien waren het de invloedrijke Noordelijke bondgenoten van de MFDP die de nationale Democratische Partij dwongen de Challenge serieus te nemen, verzonnen befaamde advocaten als Joseph Rauh de benodigde strategieën, en hielpen de COFO-activisten, aangevuld met de blanke vrijwilligers, de succesvolle totstandkoming van de MFDP verkiezingen. Hoewel de Challenge uiteindelijk leidde tot een zwak compromis dat de MFDP afwees, speelde het een belangrijke rol in de bewustwording van nationale politici. De nationale Partij hield haar belofte aan de MFDP om al haar activiteiten te integreren en meteen na zijn herverkiezing gaf President Lyndon Johnson de Justice Department opdracht om nieuwe wetgeving tegen discriminatie te ontwerpen, wat mede leidde tot de Voting Rights Act van 1965.

Ondanks dat Moses zich liet leiden door de initiatieven en behoeftes van de lokale bevolking was zijn werk achter de schermen om deze te vertalen naar Noordelingen die over meer middelen beschikten bovendien een belangrijke factor in het verwezenlijken van lokaal leiderschap. Naarmate de beweging in Mississippi meer nationale betekenis kreeg—en hij zelf werd gezien als een nationaal leider—werd het bemiddelen tussen de lokale bevolking en hun Noordelijke bondgenoten een steeds groter onderdeel van zijn dagtaak. Zijn vaardigheden en contacten en ervaringen in het Noorden speelden daarin een cruciale rol. Zijn Literacy Project, zijn aandeel in de boeken- en goedereninzamelingen in Greenwood, en zijn ondernemingen om de lokale bevolking aan *folk singers* als Seeger bloot te stellen laat dit bijvoorbeeld zien. Tevens waren zijn effectieve relaties met vertegenwoordigers van de Justice Department, John Doar in het bijzonder, afhankelijk van zijn constructieve houding. Hoewel hij de kritiek van zijn collega's in SNCC op de federale overheid deelde, zorgde zijn op consensusgerichte persoonlijkheid voor een gangbare, zelfs sympathieke verhouding tussen hen, hetgeen de lokale zwarte bevolking ten goede kwam. Daarbij was Moses extra gemotiveerd deze relatie te bewerkstelligen vanwege zijn uitzonderlijke preoccupatie met het eindigen van raciaal geweld. Meer dan de meeste burgerrechtenactivisten trok hij zich het lot van slachtoffers persoonlijk aan, zoals dat van de vermoorde Herbert Lee en Louis Allen in McComb en de drie activisten tijdens Freedom Summer. Gezien zijn rol in het versterken van de burgerrechtenbeweging in Mississippi voelde hij zich verantwoordelijk—de beul uit Camus' beeldspraak—waardoor hij al zijn invloed, contacten, en vaardigheden inzette om bijvoorbeeld hoorzittingen van de Civil Rights Commission te realiseren en verhalen van slachtoffers kenbaar te maken door bevriende journalisten.

Het beste voorbeeld van deze Noord-Zuid en *top-down/bottom up*-symbiose echter is SNCC zelf. Om de wrede onderdrukking die eerdere activisten in Mississippi verstikte tegen te gaan en om deelname aan de burgerrechtenbeweging boven het traditionele leiderschap van de zwarte middenklasse uit te tillen, had de zwarte bevolking in Mississippi SNCC *nodig*. Vooral de methode die Moses aanwendde hielp de intensiteit en effectiviteit van hun bestaande strijd te vergroten. SNCC's flexibele organisatiestructuur, het gebruik van de arme zwarte arbeidersklasse die werd genegeerd door bestaande organisaties, en de keuze van 'fulltime' activisten die alleen voor hun minimale levensonderhoud betaald werden en lange tijd op één plaats verbleven bleek effectiever dan de kleine grondstaf van de decennialange actieve NAACP. Waar zij gebonden waren aan hun werk, familie, en de richtlijnen bedacht door het nationale hoofdkantoor, kon SNCC juist lokale bewegingen voortbrengen omdat het de tijd en aantallen had om inwoners systematisch en blijvend te leren hoe ze zich konden organiseren. Velen van hen, zoals de plantagearbeidster Fannie Lou Hamer, waren klaar om deel te nemen aan de burgerrechtenbeweging. Zij bleken veel meer geneigd hieraan toe te geven in het bijzijn van activisten die zich opstelden als onderdeel—en niet aanvoerder—van de lokale gemeenschap en die bij hen bleven in de nasleep van protesten. SNCC werkte met 'gewone' burgers naast de middenklasse juist *omdat* eerdere activisten niet in staat waren geweest het grootschalige en verleidelijke idee van een beweging te creëren dat SNCC met haar 'fulltime' arbeidskrachten wel kon.

Bovendien waren de hulpmiddelen die SNCC aanwendde—blootstelling door workshops, trainingen, en bijeenkomsten; nieuwe ideeën en strategieën; vaardigheden en mankracht—en de bescheiden manier waarop ze deze aan de lokale bevolking aanboden van cruciaal belang om de laatstgenoemde voor langere termijn aan de burgerrechtenbeweging te binden. Hierin was het voorbeeld van Moses leidend. Omdat hij trouw aan de lokale bevolking boven zijn organisatie stelde was hij in staat hen als familie te behandelen en hun initiatieven te volgen ook al was hij het er niet altijd mee eens. Dit familieverband ontstond door het maandenlang opbouwen van relaties, waarin geduld, gelijkheid, luisteren en het delen van hetzelfde lot aan de basis stonden. Dit vergrootte het vertrouwen van zowel de activisten als de lokale bevolking in hun eigen kunnen. Deze ontwikkeling werd aangemoedigd door de persoonlijke fascinatie die Moses sinds zijn jeugd had voor de waarde van de ‘gewone’ mens, het belang van luisteren naar anderen en blootstelling aan zoveel mogelijk contacten en ideeën. Zo ontwikkelde hij een methode waarbij hij de opzet van massabijeenkomsten in ‘training grounds’ veranderde zodat *alle* aanwezigen zich gesterkt in hun eigen vermogen voelden. Ook creëerde hij op hun specifieke behoeftes afgestemd materiaal om hen te leren lezen en schrijven. Hoewel SNCC vaak gebruik maakte van oudere tactieken—zoals de massabijeenkomsten, scholing in ‘burgerschap,’ het steunen van zwarte kandidaten voor politieke functies, en goedereninzamelingen—paste ze deze zo aan dat ze *in zichzelf* functioneerden als een instrument voor zelfontwikkeling. Dit voegde een nieuwe dimensie aan de eeuwenoude vrijheidsstrijd toe, die de deelname aan de burgerrechtenbeweging en de diepte van de toewijding van de deelnemers effectief vergrootte.

De aanwezigheid van de SNCC activisten in zichzelf was een extra katalysator voor de lokale bevolking, vooral als hun achtergrond of persoonlijkheid als bijzonder werd ervaren. De meeste zwarte inwoners wilden zichzelf graag ontwikkelen en verbonden voelen met de wereld buiten hen. SNCC haakte hier op in middels hun workshops en ‘leadership trainings’ binnen en buiten Mississippi. Zoals Moses zelf ook erkende vormde SNCC voor de lokale bevolking en met name voor de lokale studenten die zich bij SNCC aansloten een ‘petrischaal’ voor hun ontwikkeling. Vanwege de kleinschaligheid van hun projecten waren er nauwelijks incidenten waarbij er sprake was van beïnvloeding of manipulatie, maar naarmate de concentratie van activisten op één plaats groeide, zoals in Greenwood in 1963 of tijdens Freedom Summer, verkleinde vaak de deelname en ontwikkeling van lokale deelnemers. Totdat de deelname in de politiek middels de MFDP bewees dat ‘de’ lokale bevolking noch bestond noch een eenheid vormde en dat de belangen van inwoners en ‘fulltime’ activisten zoals SNCC niet altijd dezelfde waren, functioneerde de zelfopofferende en consensuszoekende methode die Moses en SNCC aanhingen echter als een effectieve aanvulling op de methode van voorafgaande activisten.

Binnen SNCC is een zelfde tegenstelling te vinden. Hoewel ze een zelfopofferend organisatie-model aanhingen, hadden de SNCC-activisten in de praktijk een paradoxaal verlangen naar leiderschap en structuur om hun interne gang van zaken vlotjes te laten verlopen. Dit blijkt met name uit de universele drang leiderschap aan Moses toe te dichten. Hierin speelden zijn individuele talenten en achtergrond een belangrijke rol. Zijn verlegen karakter en zacht stemgeluid ondersteunden zijn boodschap van zelfopoffering maar vergrootte daarmee juist zijn charisma, de zogenaamde ‘Bob Moses Mystique.’ Zijn intellect, academische titels en zijn status als ‘buitenstaander’ maakten hem eveneens een aantrekkelijk figuur ook al—of juist omdat—hij er niet mee te koop liep. Ook zijn lef, dat grotendeels voortkwam uit zijn ervaringen in het Noorden, sprak tot de verbeelding. Maar zijn invloed vloeyde vooral voort uit zijn heldere ideeën voor de richting van de burgerrechtenbeweging in Mississippi. Hoewel hij zijn inheemse en kosmopolitische ervaringen samenvoegde in een unieke filosofie die zijn medestanders niet altijd konden volgen—zoals zijn deelname aan de vredesbeweging tegen de Vietnam oorlog in 1965—waren zij onder de indruk van de diepte van zijn visie. Zo hielpen zijn suggestieve manier van advies geven, zijn concrete voorbeeld in McComb en halsstarrige toewijding aan het verkrijgen van het stemrecht zijn collega’s in SNCC te transformeren. Van een studentengroepering gericht op integratie van openbare voorzieningen in

steden veranderde SNCC naar een professionele organisatie gericht op het verkrijgen van het stemrecht en samenwerking met de arme, lokale bevolking in de landelijke gebieden van het Diepe Zuiden. Zonder zijn doelgerichtheid en vermogen zijn ideeën uit te leggen aan zijn medestanders op een manier die raciale, geografische, en klassegrenzen overschreed, had hij hen bijvoorbeeld ook nooit kunnen overhalen om Freedom Summer op te zetten; het interne verzet tegen het idee dat honderden blanke *hun* beweging zou komen 'overnemen' en het gevaar dat dit zou opleveren voor henzelf en de lokale gemeenschap was te hevig.

Moses' werk achter de schermen en pragmatische insteek speelde ook een prominente rol in de invloed die hij oogstte. Hoewel historici hem vaak als idealist afbeelden was Moses in werkelijkheid een effectieve organisator die goed kon aanpakken. Zo voerde hij achter de schermen een aantal activiteiten uit die cruciaal waren voor het voortbestaan en de dagelijkse bezigheden van SNCC en COFO om hun programma's van de grond te krijgen. Voorbeelden hiervan waren het vaststellen van budgetten, het regelen van kantoorroimte en onderdak, strategisch advies, het uitwerken van ideeën om geld in te zamelen, het screenen van vrijwilligers, en netwerken. Met name de mate waarin hij binnen en buiten de staat zocht naar manieren om de activisten en lokale bevolking tijdens Freedom Summer te beschermen laat dit zien. De invloed die Moses verwierf kwam feitelijk voort uit de grootscheepse voorbereidingen die hij trof. Zijn collega's hadden zelfs iemand nodig wiens pragmatische vaardigheden ze konden vertrouwen omdat hun fysieke en geestelijke welzijn er vanaf hing. Desalniettemin hielp zijn bereidheid om zijn leven *met hen* te riskeren hen de moed te vinden ook dat van henzelf te riskeren. Daarbij hielpen Moses' bescheiden en consensusgerichte karakter en zijn pragmatische instelling om zich alleen te richten op wat daadwerkelijk onder hun controle lag om conflicten met andere organisaties, de lokale bevolking, en onderling te beperken. Zowel zijn directe collega's in Mississippi als het hoofdkantoor van SNCC verwachtten, en eisten zelfs, dat hij deze bemiddelende rol speelde.

Oordelen over de effectiviteit van Moses' en SNCC's benadering over organisatorisch leiderschap kunnen dus niet in simpele 'of/of' termen worden weergegeven. Democratisch groepsleiderschap was een ideaal en kon bij voorbaat nooit in een pure vorm bestaan; het kon slechts benaderd worden. Het streven naar dit ideaal was precies wat hen grote morele invloed opleverde, maar het was tevens onvermijdelijk dat dit ethos niet altijd volgehouden kon blijven worden. De paradox van het tegelijkertijd niet willen leiden maar wel leiderschap nodig hebben bleek uiteindelijk het effectieve handelen van SNCC teveel in de weg te staan. Omdat het te veel bezig was om de onderlinge verschillen uit te bannen vielen deze juist des te meer op en verhoogden ze interne conflicten. Daarbij kwam dit ideologische streven na Freedom Summer steeds meer in strijd met hun politieke doeleinden, waarvoor een strakkere organisatievorm nodig was. Op een vergelijkbare manier was het eveneens onvermijdelijk dat het succes van Moses zijn projectie als leider vergrootte maar zijn effectiviteit dreigde te verkleinen.

In combinatie met de Voting Rights Act uit 1965 die voor burgerrechtenactivisten leidde tot een zogenaamde 'overwinningcrisis' omdat ze niet wisten hoe ze nu verder moesten, laat het intrinsieke onvermogen van SNCC om haar moreel ethos hoog te houden zien dat het noodzakelijk is 'eindes'—of liever, 'overgangen'—in het burgerrechtenactivisme te erkennen ondanks continuïteiten in deelnemers, doeleinden of methodes. Moses erkende dit in feite toen hij SNCC verliet in het voorjaar van 1965. Zijn vertrek was niet alleen het gevolg van desillusie en uitputting, maar vooral van gezond verstand: zijn effectiviteit binnen de organisatie was tot een eind gekomen omdat zijn methode haaks stond op de huidige Zeitgeist. Na Freedom Summer was hij bereid geweest om verder te gaan met dezelfde, kleinschalige aanpak als voorheen. De meesten van zijn collega's wilden dit echter niet, waardoor ze steeds meer openstonden voor de ideeën van Black Power en de altijd aanwezige interne drang naar bureaucratie. Hoewel Moses geen probleem had met nationalisme an sich, was de mediagerichte methode die zijn collega's kozen om dit te verwezenlijken te ver verwijderd van zijn eigen aanpak. Als hij echter had geprobeerd zijn ideeën op te dringen—en daarmee te worden wat hij verafschuwde: een formeel leider—was de waarde die hij had voor SNCC en de zwarte bevolking van Mississippi verloren gegaan.

Na zijn vertrek uit SNCC verbleef Moses enige tijd bij Amzie Moore in Mississippi, alvorens het land uit te vluchten om de dienstplicht te ontlopen. Van 1966 tot 1968 dook hij onder in Canada, en daarna verbleef hij in Afrika tot de amnestiewet voor dienstplichtweigeraars van President Carter in 1976 werd aangenomen. Daarna maakte hij zijn PhD in filosofie op Harvard University af en begon een nieuwe carrière als activist. Hij ontwikkelde het Algebra Project, een mix van zijn methodes uit Mississippi en als onderwijzer in Tanzania. Het is een succesvol 'bottom-up' alternatief onderwijsprogramma voor kinderen in achterstandswijken dat inmiddels op scholen in dertien staten is ingevoerd. Moses leidt het Algebra Project tot op de dag van vandaag, nog steeds vanuit het principe dat verandering begint bij jezelf.





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## Curriculum Vitae

Laura Visser-Maessen (b. 1982, Sittard, the Netherlands) started her academic career at the Radboud University Nijmegen in the Netherlands, where she did two studies, American Studies (graduated 2004, *cum laude*), and English Language and Culture (graduated 2005, *cum laude*). In 2003 she spent a semester at the African-American Studies Department at the University of California, Berkeley. Here she lay the foundations for her master thesis for American Studies, *Martin Luther King, Jr. & the SCLC and Robert Moses & SNCC: Two Faces of the Civil Rights Movement's Struggle, 1957-1965*. It won the Theodore Roosevelt American History Award 2005, a Dutch national thesis competition in American History. After completing several teacher training courses and teaching English in high school, she taught various courses for the English/American Studies Department of the Radboud University Nijmegen in the academic year 2006-2007 and in 2012. Between September 2007 and December 2012 she worked as a PhD-student for the History Department of the University of Leiden, the Netherlands. She recently published the article *We Didn't Come For No Two Seats: The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and the 1964 Presidential Elections* in the academic journal *Leidschrift* and is currently working as a lecturer in American Studies at Utrecht University.

