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Civil Rights movement

Freedom Summer, 1964: An Overview

- Features -

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Just two weeks after the August 28, 1963 March on Washington, four girls aged 11-14 “Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson and Denise McNair” died in the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama.

The year 1963 was marked by assassinations and at least 35 bombings. Among those murdered were William Moore, a white civil rights activist who was assassinated on April 20, and Medgar Evers, a NAACP leader in Mississippi, who was shot down on June 12. A local segregationist, Byron De La Beckwith, was charged with Evers' murder but after two trials with all-white juries, no conviction was obtained. [1] That year, according to historian Clayborne Carson, some 20,000 civil rights demonstrators were arrested in the South. [2]

These events, especially the Birmingham bombing, pushed President Lyndon Johnson to promote the passage of a new Civil Rights Act. It passed on July 2, 1964, after 64 days of blockage by southern Senators, and with many compromises.

Nevertheless, distrust of the federal government, especially on the part of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) continued to spread. It was based on many instances of the failure of federal agencies, including the FBI, to enforce laws that were on the books prior to the 1964 Act.

In the first half of 1964 nine murders of Blacks by whites in Mississippi were reported. Not one person was prosecuted. [3] One of the victims was Louis Allen, who was shot on January 31 apparently in revenge for fingering a high-ranking klansman in the murder of Herbert Lee, a NAACP activist, back in September, 1961. No one was ever arrested in the Allen case.

Despite their skepticism, Allen's murder helped convince several SNCC leaders that without intervention from Washington, the climate of terror in the Deep South would prevent any substantial changes in the segregationist system.

Freedom Ballot, Freedom Schools

How was this intervention to be accomplished? By the Fall of 1963 a Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) including SNCC and several other groups had been formed in Mississippi and the early stages of what was to become a massive campaign to register Black voters there got underway.

COFO's thinking was that since local and state authorities, supplemented by local mobs and the KKK, would undoubtedly block any attempt to register Blacks to vote, the federal government would be forced to enter the picture, whether or not the president liked it.

The first step was a statewide “Freedom Ballot,” a mock election that drew more than 80,000 Black “voters” to demonstrate their desire to vote. The next phase was the Mississippi Summer Project of 1964, better known as “Freedom Summer,” which would bring white Northern volunteers to help COFO attempt to register Black voters who had long been prevented by chicanery and terror from doing so.

Also, in view of the miserable conditions in the state's segregated public schools, SNCC planned to create "freedom schools" in which volunteers (mostly the whites from the North) would, that summer, teach Black young people in subjects ranging from basic education to Black history and leadership skills.

The inclusion of white volunteers was controversial. Many SNCC organizers thought that bringing in whites would inhibit the development of indigenous leadership, and would increase the level of violent reactions by local klansmen. A compromise was crafted: The final number of whites would be lower than some COFO staffers had originally proposed.

After considerable debate, COFO, despite lukewarm support of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and Martin Luther King Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), gave its formal approval at the beginning of 1964. CORE, which supported the idea, was able to take on only one-fifth of the project; it was pretty much SNCC's baby.

To push this strategy further, a Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), separate from the segregationist official Democratic Party, was created. The plan was to challenge the regular Democratic Party and attempt to displace it at the national convention scheduled for August 1964, in Atlantic City, New Jersey.

The Training and the Murders

In mid-June some 300 college students, the large majority white Northerners, were brought to Western College for Women in Oxford, Ohio to train for the voter registration campaign. Another group was brought for the Freedom School project. Overall about 900 volunteers eventually participated, of whom about 135 were Black.

At the training sessions a representative of the U.S. Justice Department, John Doar, told the volunteers that the federal government could only investigate attacks on the volunteers and potential registrants, it could not protect them. He said protection was up to local police, which the volunteers knew meant the opposite, since local police were collaborators if not actual perpetrators of outrages against civil rights activists.

The volunteers were shocked. But Doar's statement was patently untrue. Two years earlier president Kennedy had sent federal troops to protect James Meredith when he attempted, (successfully, after days of rioting) to register as a student at the segregated University of Mississippi. And earlier, in September 1957, president Eisenhower had sent 1,000 soldiers of the 101st Airborne Division to Little Rock, Arkansas, to enforce the desegregation of Central High School.

Moreover, there are numerous federal laws that could have been invoked by Lyndon Johnson, who became president after the assassination of John F. Kennedy in November 1963. [\[4\]](#)

Then three volunteers — two CORE workers (James Chaney, Black, and Michael Schwerner, white) and one fresh from the Oxford orientation (Andrew Goodman, white) — disappeared after having been briefly arrested in Philadelphia, Mississippi.

A Black church, the Mt. Zion United Methodist, near Philadelphia, had been burned to the ground. The church had hosted civil rights meetings and had agreed to sponsor a Freedom School. The three men left to investigate on June 21. Their bodies were found on August 4. During the search for them the bodies of three Black men, one wearing a CORE T-shirt, were also found.

The record is clear that the FBI was notified immediately when the men did not call in per COFO procedure, but took no action for a critical 24 hours. The FBI in Mississippi at that time was all-white, and most agents were native to the state. There was no FBI field office in Mississippi. The perpetrators, it would turn out, were affiliated with the White Knights of Mississippi KKK, the largest klan organization in the state.

The White House and Department of Justice had immediately been informed about the missing men, and within days President Johnson and his attorney general Robert F. Kennedy pressured FBI director J. Edgar Hoover to investigate. He opened a new field office in Jackson, the state capital, and transferred 153 agents to Mississippi. The FBI channeled funds to an informer, who ultimately led the authorities to the bodies. [5]

What is less well-known is that Hoover also added "White Hate Groups" to the roster of groups (mainly civil rights, peace, radical, Black nationalist) targeted by the infamous COINTELPRO (Counter-Intelligence Program). Sociologist David Cunningham tells us that "Over the next five years, this repressive response by the federal government played a central role in the ultimate demise of...the White Knights..." and other klan organizations.

Hoover had had experience with the KKK in the 1920s, and although he was a racist and anti-Semite, he was also notoriously fastidious, and the KKK, "a group of sadistic vicious white trash," offended him. He viewed the civil rights movement, pro-communist in his view, as the greater danger. But he also grasped the idea that vigilantism, whether klan or any other, was a challenge to the State's (synonymous with the FBI) monopoly of the legal use of violence.

(On Dec. 4, 21 men were arrested by the FBI for violating the civil rights of the three victims. A few days later a U.S. Commissioner dropped the charges based on the fact that the FBI's testimony was second-hand and there were no actual witnesses willing to testify. Two years later, the U.S. Department of Justice charged 18 men. These included the sheriff, the deputy sheriff, and a Baptist minister, Edgar Ray Killen. Seven men were found guilty by an all-white jury. In October, 1967 sentences were handed down: two were sentenced to ten years, the other four to three to six years. Seven others, including the sheriff, were acquitted, and the jury could not agree on four, including the minister. [6] An FBI informer, an ex-klansman and Methodist minister, provided crucial testimony. According to journalist Bruce Watson, "For the next two months, jurors' homes were guarded. Many received death threats. Crosses blazed in their hometowns." [7]

A Turbulent Summer

The project, including the Freedom Schools, went forward despite continuing attacks, including bombings, many assaults, and about 1,000 arrests. COFO collected data about these events that went to 26 single-spaced pages. [8]

A number of volunteers felt there would have been even more violence if not for the fact that many Black farmers who provided safe houses for volunteers were armed. In a number of communities they had organized armed patrols to protect themselves against white vigilantes even before 1964.

SNCC and CORE volunteers, despite formal adherence to a nonviolent strategy, did not dispute local Blacks' right to armed self-defense, nor did they refuse, on occasion, to pick up a shotgun themselves and do guard duty when the homes of their hosts were threatened. [9] But when organizers from the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM), a Black nationalist organization, came to proselytize for a more aggressive pro-armed resistance strategy, they were told to leave. The issue of armed self-defense would continue to divide SNCC until it abandoned the nonviolent strategy formally a few years later.

Another controversy came as women volunteers found themselves more likely to be assigned teaching and clerical roles than sent into the field to canvass door-to-door. Some raised objections, charging discrimination.

The staff felt that having white women volunteers in the field together with Blacks would not only endanger them but also jeopardize the success of the project. The visibility of “race mixing” would trigger more violence and create even more resistance by the white community. “The net effect of this policy was to reproduce traditional sex and work roles...”

More important, perhaps, was the highly charged and divisive role of sexual relations among Freedom Summer volunteers. White female volunteers faced an explosive dilemma. “They could either reject black males’ advances and risk being labeled a racist, or they could go along at considerable physical and psychological cost to themselves.” Demonstrating another dimension of the double standard, Black women volunteers who dated white male volunteers faced staff tongue lashings; Black men who dated white women did not. [\[10\]](#)

Yet another of the difficulties faced throughout the Summer were resentments between the more “middle-class” (college-educated) volunteers, both Black and white, and Black volunteers who came out of local struggles and were less formally educated. James Forman, the veteran SNCC Executive Secretary, also felt that Northern “middle-class” elements were spreading the use of marijuana, which he quite rightly considered politically dangerous.

Despite these difficulties, and despite the continuing violence, most volunteers stayed the course. Some left one or another town literally at the point of a gun: Sheriffs and local police threatened dozens with a choice (usually after an arrest): leave Mississippi or you’ll find yourself in the company of Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner. Most simply moved to another campaign site while others joined civil rights actions in the next state over, Louisiana or Alabama. There was no lack of work to be done in those states.

Although the actual number of Blacks who managed to register was modest, only about 1600 out of some 17,000 who filled out registration forms, the project did generate a great deal of publicity and certainly deepened the political awareness of both Black and white volunteers and their Freedom School students. Some 80 volunteers stayed to continue the work.

The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party’s challenge to the segregationist Democratic Party, the parallel strategy to voter registration, soon dominated the headlines. Its delegation to the Party convention that August included several SNCC members. At first it seemed that the challenge to be seated in place of the official party might work, especially after testimony before the Party’s Credentials Committee by Mississippian Fannie Lou Hamer, who had been beaten in jail following her arrest during the voter registration campaign.

However, the Democratic leadership including president Johnson made every effort to keep the South’s Democrats in the Johnson fold for the election, which meant keeping the MFDP out. Johnson’s people used every tactic in the book of rotten politics to persuade the members of the Credentials Committee not to seat the MFDP.

Even Martin Luther King Jr. was persuaded to back a compromise, which would have allowed the MFDP only two seats. This was rejected by the MFDP delegates, who after being hustled off the convention floor, went home. The experience radicalized many in SNCC, which had already begun its move towards a “Black Power” strategy coupled with an unofficial acceptance of “armed defense” in place of nonviolence.

The Continuing Challenge

Freedom Summer, 1964: An Overview

In the fall, after most of the Northern volunteers had gone home, the KKK and local police increased their levels of harassment and violence against the continuing COFO campaign. In McComb, Mississippi, Black residents reacted to a bombing on September 20 by coming into the streets armed with guns, Molotov cocktails, and other weapons, and attacking whites and white establishments.

Finally the federal government reacted: nine klansmen were tried for arson and bombing in October. After pleading guilty, they were put on probation. Violence against civil rights activists continued nevertheless. The fire-bombing and shooting murder of Vernon Dahmer, a Black businessman and head of the Hattiesburg NAACP in January, 1966 was only one example. The FBI charged 15 men with his murder, one of whom, Sam Bowers, was later convicted in the 1964 murders of Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner.

Many of the volunteers who had come from universities had their eyes opened by their Mississippi experience, especially their exposure to local Black poverty, and their confrontation with the violence of the KKK and local police while the FBI stood by. Many returned to their campuses as experienced radicals prepared to challenge university administrations on a range of local grievances.

The Free Speech Movement at the University of California, Berkeley (September, 1964), was one of the first major expressions of protest. It was against an arbitrary rule banning tables where students recruited and solicited funds for various causes. This was followed by many of the white volunteers on various campuses organizing protests against their universities' complicity in the Vietnam war (war-related research, armed forces and CIA recruiting, Reserve Officer training).

At several universities (Columbia, Spring 1968 being a prime example) the antiwar protests were combined with protests against university expansion at the expense of their immediate African-American neighborhoods. [\[11\]](#) It is difficult to think of any expression of left and left-liberal protest from 1964 to the end of the war that did not include the presence of the veterans of Freedom Summer and their allies.

Moreover, when one views the subsequent political and occupational choices of this population as they moved into the 1970s and beyond, their level of engagement in progressive causes gives the lie to the media-driven idea that they "sold out" for jobs on Wall Street (though a handful did, indeed, move in that direction). A good example of this carry-over from one movement to the next: Two veterans of Freedom Summer were among the eight antiwar activists who broke into the Media, PA office of the FBI in March 1971 and "liberated" the files. This led to the exposure of COINTELPRO.

There were many turning points in U.S. politics in the 1960s, each one standing on the shoulders of the one before. The 1960 sit-ins and the 1961 Freedom Rides were essential to planting the seeds of the 1964 voter registration campaign.

Freedom Summer led to the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the result of which was to change the face of the South. It would have been considered crazy in those days to imagine a Chokwe Lumumba as Mayor of Jackson, Mississippi.

But just as important as the election of Black officials was the radicalization of many of the volunteers, both Black and white, who went on to be agents of social change. The survivors of this band of sisters and brothers can be proud of what they accomplished then, and since.

June 25, 2014

[Against the Current](#)

[1] In 1989 new evidence appeared and De La Beckwith was convicted. He was sentenced to life and died in prison in 2001.

[2] Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*, Harvard Univ. Press, 1981.

[3] Report to the 1964 CORE convention in Kansas City, Missouri, July 2-5. The report stated that in the previous two years 19 Blacks had been murdered in that state.

[4] For example: "Whenever the President considers that unlawful obstruction...or rebellion against the authority of the United States makes it impossible to enforce the laws of the United States...by the ordinary course of judicial proceedings, he may call into Federal service...and use such of the armed forces as he considers necessary to enforce those laws or to suppress the rebellion." (U.S. Code, Section 332, Title 10) See Len Holt, *The Summer That Didn't End: The Story of the Mississippi Civil Rights Project of 1964* (William Morrow, 1965 and DaCapo Press, 1992).

[5] David Cunningham, *Klansville, U.S.A.: The Rise and Fall of the Civil Rights-Era Ku Klux Klan* (Oxford U. Press, 2013), 55-57.

[6] In 2005 Killen was retried by the State of Mississippi after new evidence was uncovered and he was convicted of the three murders and sentenced to 20 years for each. He was 80 at the time.

As of 2013 he was still in the Mississippi State Penitentiary, better known as Parchman, a real irony since Parchman had "hosted" many arrested civil rights workers over the years.

[7] *Freedom Summer* (Penguin Books, 2010), 280.

[8] This can be found as Appendix D. in Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (Oxford U. Press, 1988).

[9] Akinyele Omowale Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back: Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement* (New York Univ. Press, 2013), chapter 4.

[10] McAdam, 107-108.

[11] For details, see Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1988), chapter 5 "Applying the Lessons of Mississippi."