Sharecroppers Challenge U.S. Apartheid: The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party

This lesson explores one of the most important events in the fight for true democracy in the U.S., when a coalition of grassroots activists challenged the Mississippi political system, the federal government and the national Democratic Party to abide by the U.S. Constitution. Working within the political “rules,” the activists formed the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP or FDP) in 1964 and mounted a legitimate challenge to the existing system of race-based exclusion. In the process, they garnered a national audience and sparked moral and ethical debates.

As historian John Dittmer explains in *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi*:

The Freedom Democratic Party was one of the most important and distinctive institutions to emerge from the civil rights movement. It challenged white supremacy in the most repressive state in the South, combining grassroots activism with a radical social agenda.

FDP had its origins in the fall of 1963, when the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) conducted a “Freedom Vote” to dramatize the exclusion of African Americans from the political process in Mississippi. More than 80,000 blacks voted black NAACP state president Aaron Henry for governor and white Tougaloo College chaplain Ed King for lieutenant governor in this mock election. The election's success led to the creation of an independent, black-led, state Democratic Party that would challenge the legitimacy of the state's white supremacist delegation at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey, in the summer of 1964.

The events surrounding the MFDP’s efforts to be seated at the Democratic National Convention of 1964 in Atlantic City provide a strong example of the unprecedented and sophisticated organizing techniques used to challenge the state sponsored terrorism that blocked political participation by African Americans.

In this lesson, students step into the shoes of key people at the Democratic Convention in a dramatic role play based on the real challenges and decisions facing the MFDP delegates.

It is our hope that after this introduction to the MFDP, students will want to learn more about the people and the strategies used to challenge the political establishment in their fight for voting rights in the United States.

We look forward to comments and suggested edits/additions from teachers and students as you use this lesson.

This lesson was developed by Teaching for Change as part of the Civil Rights Movement and Labor History Initiative in McComb, Mississippi. The lesson was written by Deborah Menkart, Sara Evers, Julian Hipkins III, and Jenice View, with research, editing, and/or input from Lisa Anderson Todd, Rachel Reinhard, Emilye Crosby, Sarah Slichter, Elizabeth Boyd, Greg Adler, and Falana McDaniel.
Enduring Understandings

- Compromise does not always equal justice.
- When voting rights are denied to anyone, everyone lacks democracy.
- The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party was not fighting for integration into the existing structure, but instead for a new political party that was truly equitable and democratic.
- The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party demonstrated the possibility of true democracy and full citizenship with everyone having an equal voice regardless of literacy levels, gender, class, race, and connections.

Essential Questions

- What would it take for there to be legitimate democracy in the United States?
- Why did Mississippians, in the face of state sponsored terrorism, take the leadership in challenging the national political party structure?

Materials

- Pre-reading: Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) Historical Background
- COFO Brochure on Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party
- Name tag for each student. Use sticky name tags and have them write their (role play) name.
  Or download MFDP name tags with photos and use 3 x 4 name tag holders.
- Role sheet, one per student. (See list below.) The roles are:

  1. Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer* (Group 1)
  2. Annie Devine (Group 1)
  3. Aaron Henry (Group 1)
  4. Victoria Gray Adams (Group 1)
  5. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.* (Group 1)
  6. Bayard Rustin (Group 1)
  7. Rev. Ed King (Group 1)
  8. Robert “Bob” Moses* (Group 1)
  9. Lawrence Guyot* (Group 1)
 10. Hollis Watkins (Group 1)
 11. Hartman Turnbow (Group 1)
 12. James Forman (Group 1)
 13. E.W. Steptoe (Group 1)
 14. Unita Blackwell (Group 1)
 15. John Scali (ABC News) (Group 2)
 16. Dr. Ollye Brown Shirley (Citizens’ Appeal) (Group 2)
 17. Malcolm Poindexter (the Philadelphia, PA Tribune) (Group 2)
 18. Citizens’ Council member William Simmons (Group 2)
 19. Mississippi Sovereignty Commission member (Group 2)
 20. The Hederman Family* (The Clarion Ledger) (Group 2)
 21. President Lyndon B. Johnson* (Group 3)
 22. FBI agent* (Group 3)
 23. Joseph Rauh Jr.* (Group 3)
 24. Edith Green * (Group 3)
 25. Hubert Humphrey* (Group 3)
 26. E.K. Collins from the Mississippi Democratic Party* (Group 3)
 27. Walter Mondale (Group 3)

* If you do not have enough students for all the roles, then at least use the roles with an asterisk*. If you have more than 27 students, double up on the roles for FBI, Citizens’ Council, Sovereignty Commission, and media.

Time

Ideally take at least two to three class periods (If only one class period is available, students should read the background texts the night before the role play.)
Grades
For grades 7 and above.

Video clips used in lesson
- MFDP background from Eyes on the Prize
- Fannie Lou Hamer speech at 1964 DNC from Freedom Summer
- MFDP response to compromise from Eyes on the Prize

Teacher Preparation
Learn as much as possible about the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) so as to be able to respond to student questions and push their critical thinking and analysis. Here are key resources.

Readings Online
- MFDP Challenge to the Democratic Convention (PDF) by Bruce Hartford and others from the Civil Rights Movement Veterans website, crmvet.org. This is an invaluable overview with analysis and first person quotes.
- Civil Rights Movement Veterans website primary documents and reflections
- “Atlantic City Revisited” – Walter Mondale and “The Movement” Useful insights into the rationale provided by the national Democratic Party leaders with an analysis and “talk back” by SNCC veteran Mike Miller.
- Mississippi at Atlantic City by SNCC veteran Charles Sherrod, article from Putting the Movement Back into Civil Rights Teaching
- Martin Luther King Papers Project description of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.

Books
- I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle by Charles M. Payne
- SNCC: The New Abolitionists by Howard Zinn
- Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi by John Dittmer
- Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC edited by Faith S. Holsaert, Martha P. N. Noonan, Judy Richardson, Betty G. Robinson, Jean S. Young, and Dorothy M. Zellner
- For a Voice and the Vote: My Journey with the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party by Lisa Anderson Todd

Films
- Standing on My Sisters Shoulders
- Freedom on My Mind
- Eyes on the Prize: Mississippi: Is This America (1962-1964)
- Freedom Summer
Overview

This lesson has four sections:

Section I: Student preparation

Students are introduced to the lesson with a warm up and background reading/viewing on the general process for delegate selection and the Freedom Democratic Party in particular.

Section II: Stepping Into the Atlantic City Convention

Students assume the roles of people who were in Atlantic City or closely connected such as President Lyndon B. Johnson at the White House or MFDP chair Lawrence Guyot who was detained in Mississippi. Following instructions on their role sheet, they ask each other questions and find information. Their main topic of discussion is the initial offer to compromise from Congresswoman Edith Green. The class then regroups to see a video clip of the testimony of Mrs. Hamer in which the MFDP was asking to be seated as the delegation representing all Mississippi Democrats.

Section III: “The Compromise”

Students learn that the Hamer testimony increased optimism for the successful seating of the MFDP at the Convention. But then they learn how LBJ, fearing he would lose the southern vote for his election, planned to defeat the MFDP. (He received information, provided by undercover FBI agents, that helped him pressure key MFDP supporters.) Students are then faced with a new, token compromise. They have to decide whether to accept what’s called a “compromise,” or not.

Section IV: What Really Happened?

Students compare the actual decision of the MFDP with their own deliberations and decisions. They also discuss the impact of the MFDP on politics in Mississippi and nationally – and the lessons it provides for the ongoing voting rights struggles today.

Instructions

Section I: Student preparation

1. Warm-up: Share this question with the class: “Imagine that you (because of your race, gender, national origin, or other aspect of your identity) are not allowed to participate in any school event – sports, plays, assemblies, field trips, awards ceremonies – even graduation ceremonies. How would this affect your life? How would you feel about it? What might you do?”

Have students write or express in a drawing their response to the question. Then let students discuss among themselves their personal reactions. Call on a few students to share their stories.

Explain to students that they will be learning about a time when most African Americans in Mississippi were denied access to voting rights. Add that the right to vote is not just a ceremonial exercise in civic responsibility, but can affect key basic human rights in daily life. For example, local elections can determine whether there is a:
• sheriff who will protect or persecute you
• school board that provides a quality education for your children
• Mayor who will provide basic services such as sanitation, road works, and electricity for your neighborhood.

What strategies do you think people in Mississippi used to challenge this denial of their rights as citizens?

2. Voting Rights Struggle Context (Optional): If your students are not familiar with the repression against African Americans who tried to vote in Mississippi, provide them with some background in order to appreciate the importance of the MFDP and the wisdom and courage of those involved. This can be accomplished by reading some first person accounts (search on the CRMvet.org website) or watching excerpts from the films *Standing on My Sisters Shoulders, Freedom on My Mind, Eyes on the Prize,* and/or *Freedom Summer*.

3. Overview of the Process for Selecting Convention Delegates: Explain to students that:

You are now going to travel back in time to the 1960s when activists both young and old took on the political system in Mississippi in a way that had never been done before nor since in the United States. Blacks had been excluded from voting in Mississippi and every time they tried to register, they risked losing their job, firebombing of their home, beatings, harassment, even murder. So, activists in the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) came up with a plan which they described to people in the state with a brochure. I am going to give you copies of the brochure, which back then would have been dangerous to be caught with.

Distribute the COFO brochure to students in pairs and ask them to take some time to read and figure out a plan. After students have had time, ask for some volunteers to explain the plan. Then ask some probing questions to be sure everyone understands the following:

• The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party was open to all, making it more legitimate than the Mississippi Democratic Party that denied African Americans the right to participate.

• The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party encouraged the participation of men and women – this was before the “women’s movement” and certainly not the norm for state delegations.

• There was a sequence of meetings—at precinct, county, and district—and a statewide levels to elect the delegation to go to Atlantic City. (Refer to the graphic.)

• The successful development of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party took place in four months among people who had never been allowed to vote before, let alone participate in precinct meetings nor conventions. Many were not literate.

• This was a parallel, nonviolent, alternative process that would abide by the Constitution. Therefore it was more legitimate than the officially recognized, yet un-Constitutional Mississippi Democratic Party that brazenly violated the law and human rights.
4. **Pre-Readings about the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP):** Explain that:

   High school and even college students never get to learn about the MFDP when they study the Civil Rights Movement, yet it is in many ways more important than many of the mass demonstrations that are featured in textbooks. You are about to read some first person stories and reports about how it went. They include scary and violent things that happened that summer. After these readings, you will step into the shoes of people who travelled from Mississippi to the Democratic National Convention. [Point to the top level of the graphic on the brochure.]

Distribute the pre-readings to students in small groups to read in class or at home. The readings will give students crucial background on the MFDP. Once students have completed the pre-reading (either in class or at home), engage in a discussion to be sure there is a clear understanding of what they read. It may be confusing that there were two registration processes going on – the attempted registration to vote in state and federal elections and the parallel process of Freedom Registration on a simple, one page form, for the Freedom Democratic Party.

Have students share their questions and reactions. You could ask them to summarize or illustrate the text.

**Section II: Stepping Into the Atlantic City Convention**

This role play works best when orchestrated like a dramatic show with the actors stepping into history. In advance of this lesson, most students will not know the outcome of the Convention Challenge and what was decided. Don’t pre-alert them since the role play is most effective when students experience the highs and lows of the Convention just like the MFDP delegates did. After the role play they can compare their decisions and reflections to those of the delegates. It will be more meaningful and interesting at that point.

**1. Introduce Role Play.** The students are going to assume the roles of real individuals involved with both the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) and others at the Democratic National Convention. They will have to be ready to answer questions and they will also have a chance to identify their allies and opponents among the other participants.

**2. Distribute roles.** Hand out one role sheet to each student and a name tag. (Depending on how many students there are in the class, some of the roles may need to be assumed by two people each or you may select fewer roles. If you have more than 27 students, duplicate the roles of the media, FBI, Citizens’ Council and/or Sovereignty Commission members.)

Students should take a few minutes to read the background information on their role card and fill out a name tag with the first and last name of the role they are assuming. (You can also use the printed name tags with photos. Those fit in 3x4 name tag holders.)

* The student(s) role playing FBI agents will pretend to be reporters for the role play. Make sure these students write their alias (“Reporter”), not “FBI,” on their name tag.

If time allows, give the students the roles to take home in preparation for the role play the next day. Ask them to research more information about their character, finding at least two additional facts to add to the description that was provided.
3. **Role-play.** Show the segment from *Eyes on the Prize* (41:53-44:55) about the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, ending with the arrival in Atlantic City.

Tell the students that they just got off that bus too and are stepping into the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey.

Explain that the MFDP is making quite a stir and that Oregon Congresswoman Green has just made a proposal that the MFDP accepts as a way to compromise on the dispute. Have the student playing Ms. Green read her brief bio and proposal to the class:

> I have served in the United States House of Representatives from 1955 to 1974 as a Democrat. While in office I have strived to promote equality wherever I can. You may know me from the Title IX school reform I was instrumental in passing. Title IX makes sure all genders have an equal chance to participate in school athletics.

> I was a strong advocate on behalf of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party at the Democratic National Convention. I am a member of the Credentials Committee, the part of the Democratic Party that decides on disputes over which group of people should be delegates at the convention. Before the convention began I proposed a compromise of the MFDP Convention Challenge at the Atlantic City Democratic National Convention.

> My proposal states: Members of both delegations would be seated if they pledged their loyalty to the national Democratic Party. The two groups would share the delegation’s votes.

Then explain to the students what happened next: The white Mississippi delegation said it would leave the convention if this plan were accepted. Delegations from other Southern states made it clear they will follow the Mississippians in a convention walk-out.

So, the Credentials Committee (the committee that decides which group of delegates will represent Mississippi) has three possible options: (It helps to have these posted on a flip chart or smart board for all to see).

1. Recognize the MFDP as the legitimate representatives of the state of Mississippi and give them the convention seats for Mississippi.

2. Recognize the regular all-white Mississippi Democratic Party as the legitimate representatives of the state of Mississippi and give them the convention seats for Mississippi.

3. Adopt the Green Compromise (or find some other proposal) that shares the delegation’s votes between the delegates of both parties who pledged loyalty to the Democratic Party.

Ask students to go throughout the room and introduce themselves (in character) to other people in the room. Attached to each biography are instructions and questions that will guide the student through the role of their participant in the proceedings of the Atlantic City convention.

Their task is to find out their relationship to the other participants (are they allies in fighting for representation for the MFDP? opponents? neither?) and how they feel about the proposal made by Congresswoman Green.

You can model an interaction with another student as an example of the kind of conversations they might have as follows:
• Hi, I’m __________, are you here for the Democratic National Convention?
• Where are you from?
• What do you think of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party?
• How did you hear about the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party?
• What do you think about the proposal made by Congresswoman Green?
• Do you want the MFDP to be seated as delegates at the convention? Why or why not?

4. **Regroup.** Once the students have had about 10-15 minutes interacting with the characters and most students have completed the sheet, it is time to have them regroup. (Make sure that while the students are interacting that the student playing the FBI agent has given some information about the MFDP strategy to LBJ.)

Have students share insights about what they are hearing from fellow attendees at the Convention. Ask questions such as: Did you meet people who support the Edith Green compromise? Who oppose it and why? What do you predict will be the outcome?

Explain that they will now watch the testimony from one of the delegates, Fannie Lou Hamer, to the Credentials Committee. Have the student acting as Hamer stand up and read the first section of her bio out loud.

> Before getting involved with the Civil Rights Movement I was a sharecropper, a wife, and a mother. After attending a SNCC voter registration meeting in Ruleville, MS, I became convinced that I should help more black folks to exercise their constitutional right to vote. Many black people had been threatened with violence and even death when they tried to register to vote. White supremacists who worked as police officers, lawyers, judges and even local store owners tried to stop us from registering. I had been jailed and beaten for trying.

> Some people thought I was foolhardy because registering blacks to vote was a dangerous job. I guess if I’d had any sense, I’d have been scared--but what was the point of being scared? The only thing white people could do was kill me, and it seemed they’d been trying to do that a little at a time since I could remember. My hard work paid off as more people registered to vote. Eventually I was elected MFDP vice-chair.

5. **Hamer testimony.** Show the **video clip** of Hamer’s testimony at the convention. About ⅓ way through, while students are riveted -- turn it off. Explain that turning it off is what President Lyndon Baines Johnson (LBJ) had the media do that night. He called a pre-planned press conference for a routine speech to visiting Governors right in the middle of Hamer’s speech, to ensure that the media would broadcast his press conference instead, to prevent the nation from hearing Mrs. Hamer’s speech. Have students talk in pairs -- why would he have done that? Then ask the students if they would like to hear the rest of her testimony. (Or use the segment from the film *Freedom Summer* that includes Lyndon Johnson’s interruption and commentary by Bob Moses. The segment is from 1:35-1:40.)
Section III: “The Compromise”

1. “The Compromise”: Explain to the students that after Hamer’s testimony, the likelihood of a vote in favor of the MFDP from the Credentials Committee was very high.

Pause to allow the MFDP delegates and supporters to enjoy being so close to victory.

Then, reveal to the class that one (or two depending on the number of students in the class) of the journalists were not who they said they were. They were an FBI agent posing as a reporter to spy on the MFDP.

(President Johnson had about 30 FBI agents at the Atlantic City Convention who bugged rooms and used other means to gather information to undermine the MFDP.)

Inform the class that President Lyndon B. Johnson has the names of supporters and used his political muscle to intimidate some Credentials Committee members into withdrawing support from the MFDP. Here is one example:

Virna Canson, a California delegate to the committee, was informed that her husband would not be selected for a judgeship if she continued to support the MFDP’s bid. While in Atlantic City, Canson had met with Annie Devine and Fannie Lou Hamer and “didn’t have any questions about what is right or wrong, she knew it was right,” according to one SNCC field secretary. President Johnson called California Governor Pat Brown and “beat the living daylights” out of him, according to Joseph Rauh, for permitting the California delegation to pass a resolution in support of the MFDP. Brown, intimidated, asked Canson to reverse her committee vote.

Now, Johnson, Hubert Humphrey, Walter Mondale, Walter Reuther and others have a final offer to force on the MFDP. (Note to the teacher: At the Convention, there were other options discussed by the Democratic Party leadership and lots of strategy meetings and calls. For the sake of this lesson, we have reduced them to this one “compromise.” It is in quotes because it was not truly a “compromise” since there was no room for negotiation. It was a take-it-or-leave-it offer.)

The all-white Mississippi Democratic Party delegation will be seated, if they pledge loyalty to the Democratic Party. The integrated Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party will be given two “delegate at large” seats (to two men, one black and one white, selected by the Democratic Party.) A segregated delegation will not be seated at the next Democratic Convention in 1968.

The students have a choice before them: Do they accept or reject?

2. Presentation of Differing Points of View:
Before making their decision, students will hear from selected leaders. If time permits, the teacher should read this section:

Bayard Rustin: “You have been involved in protest, now they are giving you the right to go into politics. And in protest there must never be any compromise. In politics there is always compromise. And therefore you young people have got to learn now how to compromise in order to get in to play your major role... Capture those two seats because those two seats represent the whole Mississippi delegation now and you will have an hour to speak to the world from a platform which you will never get again. And begin to play the critical game.”
Explain the political pressure placed upon Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King to advise the MFDP against taking the compromise by reading this account: *Hubert Humphrey pressured Dr. King when he “promised [King] there would be a new day in Mississippi if you accept this proposal.” Establishment democrats insisted King advise the MFDP to accept the compromise. Union leader, Walter Reuther, a prominent figure in the Democratic Party, warned King: “Your funding is on the line. The kind of money you got from us in Birmingham is there again for Mississippi, but you've got to help us and we've got to help Johnson.” Dr. King had to walk a fine line in order to retain the useful relationships and still urge his peers to vote their conscious.*

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King: “I am not going to counsel you to accept or reject, that is your decision. ... Being a Negro leader, I want you to take this, but if I were a Mississippi Negro, I would vote against it.”

Bob Moses: “We are not here to bring politics to our morality, but morality to our politics.”

3. Students reflect on response. Have the students form small groups based on the group number at the top of their role sheet. There they can discuss the compromise and whether or not the MFDP should accept it.

  - **Group One:** activists working towards the seating of the MFDP as delegates.
  - **Group Two:** journalists and segregationists who are attending the convention as outsiders to the political maneuvering.
  - **Group Three:** members of the Democratic Party establishment and their agents.

Encourage students to stay in role as they discuss the compromise. Then have students write individually, in role, an answer to the question “Should the MFDP take the compromise? Why or why not?”

Section IV: What Really Happened?

1. Responses. Have students share some of the responses they came up with and why. Then share with the students the actual result: the compromise was rejected by the MFDP. As Mrs. Hamer said:

   “We didn’t come all this way for no two seats when all of us is tired.”

2. Power play. Watch the segment from *Eyes on the Prize* (47:00-55:08) about the conclusion of the convention. Have students raise their hands when they see “themselves” (their role) in the film.

3. Debrief. Have students step out of their role to discuss the following questions in small groups. Pause after each question to solicit some responses or questions for the full group.

   - How did playing your role at the convention make you feel?
   - Were you surprised at the response of the character you were playing or by anything that happened?
   - Was the MFDP effort a success? Why or why not? What else would you need to know to really answer this question?
   - What is a compromise?
• When do you think politicians should compromise?

This would be a good time to share some of the online readings listed at the beginning as background for teachers. Students would have enough background information to understand the readings and would most likely find them very interesting. The readings reveal more of the maneuvering by the administration and the round the clock strategizing and outreach by the MFDP.

4. Possible follow-up assignments include:

a. Discuss and/or write about the essential questions:
   • What would it take to bring about actual democracy in the United States?
   • Why did Civil Rights activists from Mississippi take the lead in challenging the national Democratic political party structure?

b. Write a diary entry, letter home, or news article about what they experienced at the convention.

c. Create a dialogue between any two historical figures from the role play.

d. Examine barriers to full voting rights today. What strategies from the MFDP could be applied to current injustices?

e. Research and add new roles to the role play. Possible roles include:
   • Senator James Eastland
   • Senator John Stennis
   • Governor Paul Johnson
   • Dorie Ladner
   • Joyce Ladner
   • Ivanhoe Donaldson
   • Stokely Carmichael
   • Mendy Samstein
   • Eleanor Holmes Norton
   • Sharlene Kranz
**Hubert Humphrey**  
Democratic Senator from Minnesota  

I am a liberal senator from Minnesota who has a strong record of supporting the civil rights cause.

At the 1948 Democratic National Convention I gave a speech urging the party to "get out of the shadow of states' rights and walk forthrightly into the bright sunshine of human rights." As a result there was a southern state walkout.

At this 1964 convention I have been given the delicate task of keeping the northern state delegations from supporting the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party while ensuring that the southern states delegations do not withdraw party support.

This means I had to sacrifice my ideals about race discrimination for the sake of making the Democratic Party politically strong.

I would like to be President of the United States some day, and I think President Lyndon Johnson will select me for the nomination of Vice President if I am successful in keeping the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in line at the convention. Pretty soon I will find out his choice.

**Interview Questions and Assignment**

1) Find President Lyndon B. Johnson. Ask him how much more he wants you to do to keep the MFDP off the convention floor and disrupting a harmonious convention?

2) Find Credentials Committee members such as Joseph Rauh and civil rights leaders like the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. Let them know that during the course of the convention, they will have to demonstrate their loyalty to the Democratic Party and President Lyndon B. Johnson. Ask them each, “Are you more loyal to the MFDP or to your President?”

3) Talk to President Lyndon B. Johnson about the reasons for the final offer.
Agent

Federal Bureau of Investigation

I am one of 30 FBI personnel (27 agents, two stenographers, and a radio operator) who arrived in Atlantic City two days before the Mississippi Freedom Democrats. We are very busy because President Johnson is obsessed with tracking the MFDP’s every move and spoken word. He initiated background searches on all MFDP delegates back in July. Once they arrived for the convention, we began to use wiretaps and informants at all MFDP meetings.

With the cooperation of NBC, the television network covering the convention, I am posing as a journalist to obtain off-the-record information from the Freedom Democrats.

The President was worried about the MFDP’s challenge to be seated and he wants to put a lot of pressure on members of the Credentials Committee not to side with them. He does not want any embarrassment, especially not a walkout by white southern delegates.

Note: When filling out your name tag make sure to remember you are going undercover as a journalist. Write a fake name or “journalist” instead of FBI agent on your name tag. Do NOT reveal your true identity.

Interview Assignment

1) Posing as a journalist, interview people to find the names of two key Democratic supporters of the MFDP. People you might ask are Bayard Rustin, Joseph Rauh, and Annie Devine – they should know! (LBJ has to keep up to date about who is still with the MFDP so he can pressure them to drop their support of the MFDP.)

2) Ask any two people at the convention about their thoughts on the three possible options for the Credentials Committee regarding the MFDP? Which one do they support and why? Do you agree with them?
Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer
Co-founder of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party

Before getting involved with the Civil Rights Movement, I was a sharecropper, a wife, and a mother. After the SNCC students came to Ruleville, Miss., I decided to register to vote and became convinced that I should help more black folks to exercise their constitutional right to vote. Many black people had been threatened with violence and even death when they tried to register to vote. White supremacists who worked as police officers, lawyers, judges and even local store owners tried to stop us from registering. I had been jailed and beaten for trying.

Some people thought I was foolhardy because urging blacks to register to vote was a dangerous job. I guess if I’d had any sense, I’d have been scared—but what was the point of being scared? The only thing white people could do was kill me, and it seemed they’d been trying to do that a little at a time since I could remember.

My hard work paid off as more people tried to apply to register to vote. Eventually I was elected MFDP vice-chair. The mission of the 68 members who traveled to the Democratic National Convention was to gain political power and to have a voice in local and national decisions that affected the daily lives of black people living throughout the state of Mississippi.

I look forward to testifying at the Credentials Committee hearing on the MFDP at this Democratic National Convention. I plan to say: “If the Freedom Democratic Party is not seated now I question America…Is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave, where we have to sleep with our telephones off the hooks because our lives be threatened daily, because we want to live as decent human beings, in America?”

[Here is a sneak peek into my future: After the Atlantic City convention, I was also a part of the Congressional Challenge. The Challenge was our effort to stop five white Mississippi congressmen from being sworn into office.]

Interview Questions

1) Find another person involved in the fight for voting rights. Compare your life experience to the experiences they’ve had as part of the Civil Rights movement.

Ask them what part of Mississippi or the USA they are from.

How was their experience different from yours? How was it the same?

What struggles did you both face?

2) Ask any two people at the convention about their thoughts on the three possible options for the Credentials Committee regarding the MFDP. Which one do they support and why? Do you agree with them?
Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.
National Civil Rights Leader

Many of my supporters and opponents knew very well that I believed in working within the law if those laws were just. I also believed in nonviolence and saw the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party as an excellent opportunity to challenge the all-white Mississippi delegation and include the only freely selected party in the state.

I toured Mississippi at the invitation of Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) field secretary Bob Moses during Freedom Summer to support the MFDP. Less than three weeks after my visit, the bodies of three of the Freedom Summer organizers were found. Their brutal deaths represented an “attack on the human brotherhood taught by all the great religions of mankind.”

Later, I sent a telegram to President Lyndon B. Johnson urging that the MFDP be seated “as the only democratically constituted delegation from Mississippi.”

In my testimony to the Credentials Committee, I plan to say: “If you value your party, if you value your nation, if you value the democratic process, then you must recognize that Freedom Party delegation.”

Interview Question

1) Ask any two people at the convention about their thoughts on the three possible options for the Credentials Committee regarding the MFDP. Which one do they support and why? Do you agree with them?
President Lyndon B. Johnson  
(from the White House)

I am the Presidential candidate for the Democratic Party and I signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964. My opponent, Republication Barry Goldwater, did not support the Civil Rights Act. But that does not seem to be enough for the rabble rousing Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. If the MFDP gets the votes to be seated as delegates there will be a very public showdown between civil rights Democrats and segregationist Democrats. The result: I may not get elected! Being a politician, especially one running for President, means walking a fine line about controversial issues. I need to keep the Southern Democrats happy by limiting the amount of power those Mississippi Negroes have. But I also need to keep up my reputation as someone who is trying to improve race relations in America.

I’m not telling many people my strategy: I have set up the perfect plan for a smooth Atlantic City convention. First off, I put Senator Hubert Humphrey in charge of keeping the MFDP in line. He has a strong reputation for his support of civil rights, so that should soothe any Northern Democrats looking to get involved in the issue. I’ve given him strict instructions that the MFDP are not to be seated. I’ll offer him the vice presidential nomination in exchange for quashing support for the MFDP among Democrats. This should keep the southern Democrats happy.

Secondly, I’ve got the FBI posing as journalists so that they can keep me informed about what the MFDP is up to in Atlantic City. The Credentials Committee members who support the MFDP will all get phone calls from me to threaten them if they get their priorities mixed up.

I’m keeping a close eye on the convention proceedings. Fannie Lou Hamer, with all her singing and Christian hymns, is gaining too much media attention. In fact, if she or anyone else manages to gain sympathy when they testify, I will be ready to call a press conference to interrupt the Democratic Convention broadcast.

Throughout it all, I am trying to appeal to conservative democrats, liberal democrats, white America and of course the Negroes, too.

Interview Assignments

1) Find Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Pressure him to support the Democratic Party. Explain that if the MFDP is seated, he risks all future support from the federal gov’t. and funding from key institutions.

2) Find Hubert Humphrey and tell him: “If you can prevent a floor fight over civil rights, you will be the next Vice-President of the United States.”

3) Find the FBI agent(s) and ask for information about support for the MFDP. Once you have up-to-date information you are able to shut down Edith Green’s proposal by pressuring the hold out Democrats to vote against seating the MFDP as delegates. Find Hubert Humphrey and discuss the new “compromise”:

The all-white Mississippi delegation will be seated if they pledge loyalty to the Democratic Party candidates. Two MFDP members (Aaron Henry and Ed King) will be given “delegate at large” status.
Joseph Rauh Jr.
Member of Credential Committee, attorney for Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party

I was born in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1911 to German immigrants. I later went to law school and founded the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA.) I continued to use my law degree to advance the cause of civil rights including my work with Senator Humphrey in 1948 on a strong civil rights platform for the Democratic Party.

While still attorney for the U.A.W., I signed on as the attorney for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party shortly after meeting Bob Moses and James Forman in March of 1964 at a Washington symposium on direct action. I worked closely with the MFDP in planning for the Democratic National Convention and was optimistic about the MFDP’s chances about being seated at the convention if LBJ stayed neutral and my strategy could work.

Alongside Edith Green, I advocated on behalf of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party at the Credentials Committee hearing and to the media at the Democratic National Convention.

I am a member of the Credentials Committee (the part of the part of the Democratic Party that decides on disputes over whether groups of people should be included in the party.) This position gave me a chance to help the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party get their voice heard at the convention.

In case anyone asks, a key Democrat needed to get the votes for Congresswoman Green’s proposal is Jesse Unruh.

Interview Question

1) Ask any two people at the convention about their thoughts on the three possible options for the Credentials Committee regarding the MFDP. Which one do they support and why? Do you agree with them?

(Source: Eyes on the Prize interview.)
Lawrence Guyot
Chair, Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party
(Not at the convention, on bond for recent jailing, cannot leave Mississippi.)

“Why did I join the movement? I was rebelling against everything. I still am. I think we need to change every institution we know. I came to that conclusion when I was seventeen years old. At first I thought of being a teacher, or a doctor; now I would like to get married, and do just what I’m doing now… I’m not satisfied with any condition that I’m aware of in America.”

I was born in Pass Christian, Miss. in 1939 to a father who was a builder and carpenter and a mother who worked as a domestic. At 17, I went to Tougaloo College on a scholarship and majored in biology and philosophy. While I was there, I learned about the lack of voting rights for blacks in the state and joined the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). When you said “I want to vote” and you were black in Mississippi, you became an instant enemy of the state. I was jailed multiple times and beaten nearly to death for voter registration activities.

I really believe that Mrs. Hamer and all the rest of us would have been killed in that Winona jail in 1963 if Medgar Evers had not been killed. The white folks couldn’t have six people getting killed all at the same time. We were all beaten to the extent that if any of us were going to turn around, that should have been enough to turn us around; none of us did, because we firmly believed we were doing the right thing, that we were on the right road…we were able to persuade people to risk everything they owned to fight for a future yet unseen.

In 1964, I directed the Freedom Summer Project in Hattiesburg, Miss. That same year, I was elected founding chairperson of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. I could not go with the delegation to the Convention in Atlantic City because I had been jailed in Mississippi for registering black voters. Attending would have caused forfeiture of a property bond posted to secure my release from jail. But I am there in spirit. [For the purpose of this role play, explain to people that you are actually in Mississippi, so just participating “in spirit.”]

Interview Questions
1) Find another person involved in the fight for voting rights. Compare your life experience to the experiences they’ve had as part of the Civil Rights movement. Ask them what part of Mississippi or the USA they are from.

How was their experience different from yours? How was it the same?

What struggles did you both face?

2) Ask any two people at the convention about their thoughts on the three possible options for the Credentials Committee regarding the MFDP. Which one do they support and why? Do you agree with them?
E. K. Collins
Mississippi Democratic Party (all white)

If Lyndon B. Johnson thinks he’s getting the support of me or any other member of the Mississippi delegation, he’s got another thing coming! That liberal is doing far too much to support the Negro cause in striking down segregation.

My fellow Mississippi delegates and I will do everything in our power to make sure the so called “Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party” does not take our seats!

First off, I say that the Negroes at home have no trouble voting. If they aren’t voting, it must be because they don’t want to, simple as that.

Second, I am reminding the Democrats of our support in previous elections.

Little does Johnson know that we are planning to support his Republican rival, Barry Goldwater, in this election. It is a bold move for us Democratic delegates to support the opposite party, but the civil rights movement is taking over the Democratic Party. The other delegates from the official Mississippi state delegation and I are willing to part from the Democratic Party in order to uphold segregation in Mississippi.

The Democratic leadership had better tread very lightly if it wants any support from the Mississippi delegation.

Interview Questions

1) Find President Lyndon B. Johnson and remind him that he stands to lose the support of the southern delegates if he does not find a way to block the proposal to seat the MFDP as delegates.

2) Ask any two people at the convention about their thoughts on the three possible options for the Credentials Committee regarding the MFDP. Which one do they support and why? Do you agree with them?
The Hederman Family
Owners, The Clarion-Ledger

Well, we here at The Clarion-Ledger do our part to maintain the home front. Each time one of those Negroes goes and tries to get registered, we make sure to print their name in the paper. That way, employers, bankers and the like, know who they are dealing with. They might decide to fire that person, or call in their credit.

Last year, when that no good Dr. King led that “March on Washington” we made sure to get the headline right when they left town “Washington is Clean Again with Negro Trash Removed.” Apparently the Negroes have a different name for our paper “The Klan-Ledger.” Luckily for us, our family owns several Mississippi papers so we can use our voice to advance the cause of segregation all over the state.

This summer we had a lot of weirdoes from the north helping the Negroes in our state cause all sorts of trouble. Well, three of those people disappeared and I’m sure you know why. We didn’t give the story much coverage, they don’t need any attention. In fact, until they found the bodies, I agreed with our Mississippi governor that those commies had probably gone to Cuba.

Likewise, I don’t think the good people of Mississippi need to hear about that Negro party at the Convention here in Atlantic City.

Interview Questions
1) Find a member of the Mississippi Democratic Party (the white delegation). Ask them about Lyndon B. Johnson. Do they support his bid for President?

2) Find a member of the MFDP. Ask them why they want to be able to vote. Emphasize what your paper will continue to do to Negroes that register.

3) Ask any two people at the convention about their thoughts on the three possible options for the Credentials Committee regarding the MFDP. Which one do they support and why? Do you agree with them?
Robert “Bob” Parris Moses  
Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee

I grew up in Harlem and had never even been to the South, but when I saw newspaper pictures of college students in Greensboro conducting sit-ins, I knew I had to go.

I left a good job teaching math at a New York prep school to work with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC—everybody just called it “snick” in Mississippi.) I was 24 and it was 1960. I wore bib overalls and black-rimmed glasses. I was quiet and philosophical.

People called me a leader, but I was really an organizer. There’s a difference. Unlike some civil rights organizations, SNCC believed in group-centered leadership—helping empower local people to organize Movement work in their own communities.

Mr. Amzie Moore, a long time and well-respected civil rights leader in the Delta, convinced me that voting rights were the key to change. Voter registration was rough. We would go to sharecroppers’ homes, to churches, out in the fields—anyplace we could talk to people about signing up to vote. People were scared. They knew they could lose their jobs or the Klan might visit if they tried to vote. It happened to some folks. It was dangerous for us, too. A lot of SNCC people were beaten, firebombed, harassed just for trying to help people register. But we didn’t give up. We just kept taking people down to the courthouse to try to register. And gradually, some, but not many, people succeeded.

A big breakthrough was the Freedom Vote of 1963. That was an unofficial ballot organized by civil rights workers to show that black people would vote if they could, if they were not discriminated against at the polls. More than 80,000 black Mississippians voted! That led to creating the MFDP to challenge the state regular delegation that brought us to this 1964 Democratic National Convention.

**Interview Questions**

1) Find another person involved in the fight for voting rights. Compare your life experience to the experiences they’ve had as part of the Civil Rights movement. Ask them what part of Mississippi or the USA they are from.

How was their experience different from yours? How was it the same?

What struggles did you both face?

2) Ask any two people at the convention about their thoughts on the three possible options for the Credentials Committee regarding the MFDP. Which one do they support and why? Do you agree with them?
Congresswoman Edith Green
Member of Credentials Committee, Democrat from Oregon

I have served in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1955 to 1974 as a Democrat. While in office I have strived to promote equality wherever I can. You may know me from the Title IX school reform I was instrumental in passing. Title IX makes sure all genders have an equal chance to participate in school athletics.

I am a strong advocate on behalf of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party at this Democratic National Convention.

I am a member of the Credentials Committee (the part of the part of the Democratic Party that decides on disputes over whether groups of people should be the delegates at the convention.

I proposed the first compromise at the Atlantic City Democratic National Convention. My proposal states: I have served in the United States House of Representatives from 1955 to 1974 as a Democrat. While in office I have strived to promote equality wherever I can. You may know me from the Title IX school reform I was instrumental in passing. Title IX makes sure all genders have an equal chance to participate in school athletics.

I was a strong advocate on behalf of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party at the Democratic National Convention. I am a member of the Credentials Committee, the part of the Democratic Party that decides on disputes over which group of people should be delegates at the convention. Before the convention began I proposed a compromise of the MFDP Convention Challenge at the Atlantic City Democratic National Convention.

My proposal states that: Members of both delegations would be seated if they pledged their loyalty to the national Democratic Party. The two groups would share the delegation’s votes.

Members of both delegations should be seated if they pledge their loyalty to the national Democratic Party. The two groups share the delegation’s 68 votes.

Interview Question and Assignment

1) Ask any two people at the convention about their thoughts on your proposal. What do they say?

2) Ask any two people at the convention about their thoughts on the three possible options for the Credentials Committee regarding the MFDP. Which one do they support and why? Do you agree with them?
Victoria Gray Adams
Founder of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party

I could live in any state I wanted to because I am a businesswoman. That gave me choices. I figure that if I could live in another state and exercise my rights and be free, then I should be able to live that way in Mississippi, too. So that’s what I’ve decided to do.

I understand that the role of women is important in the fight for civil rights. One of the first things I did with the MFDP was run for office. I was nominated as a candidate for the U.S. Senate. I didn’t make it past the primaries, but running for office helped to bring our issues to the forefront and build momentum. Soon afterwards, we started to challenge the national Democratic Party for delegate seats at the national convention.

[Here is a sneak peek into my future: After the Atlantic City convention, I was also a part of the Congressional Challenge. The Challenge was our effort to stop five white Mississippi congressmen from being sworn into office. We didn’t think they were fairly elected because blacks had been systematically and deliberately excluded from the electoral process. I helped organize 600 men and women to lobby and protest. Our objections didn’t stop the swearing in, but we did bring a debate about voting rights to the floor of the House of Representatives.]

Interview Questions

1) Find another person involved in the fight for voting rights. Compare your life experience to the experiences they’ve had as part of the Civil Rights Movement.

Ask them what part of Mississippi or the USA they are from.

How was their experience different from yours? How was it the same?

What struggles did you both face?

2) Ask any two people at the convention about their thoughts on the three possible options for the Credentials Committee regarding the MFDP. Which one do they support and why? Do you agree with them?
Mrs. Annie Devine
Co-founder of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party

Born in 1912 and raised in Canton, Miss., I have lived under the injustices of Jim Crow and the terrorism of white supremacists all my life.

I was a public school teacher and then I had a comfortable office job working in an insurance agency. I left that work behind in the early 1960’s to devote myself full time to the voter registration movement and now the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. The MFDP is made up of blacks and whites from Mississippi who wanted to be recognized in an integrated, legitimate delegation at the Democratic National Convention of 1964. To prepare we studied the U.S. Constitution and our rights in the state of Mississippi.

We are using the law to try to force the Democratic Party to give us seats, which would mean legitimate political power within the national Democratic Party. This is a battle for equal rights. I say: “America, you need to think about your soul.”

When I talk to people at the convention and to the world (through the televised coverage of the MFDP at the convention), I plan to tell them about the injustices faced by black people: “We have been treated like beasts in Mississippi. They shot us down like animals. We risk our lives coming up here...politics must be corrupt if it don’t care none about people down here...these politicians sit in positions and forget the people who put them there.”

One of the people I have enjoyed talking with here is California delegate Virna Canson. She clearly understands and supports our cause.

[Sneak peek into the future: My work fighting for civil rights continued after the trip to the 1964 Convention. Fannie Lou Hamer, Victoria Gray and I were the first three black women ever seated on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives, and the first blacks from Mississippi to be there since 1884.]

Interview Questions

1) Find another person involved in the fight for voting rights. Compare your life experience to the experiences they’ve had as part of the Civil Rights movement.

Ask them what part of Mississippi or the USA they are from.

How was their experience different from yours? How was it the same?

What struggles did you both face?

2) Ask any two people at the convention about their thoughts on the three possible options for the Credentials Committee regarding the MFDP. Which one do they support and why? Do you agree with them?
James Forman  
Executive Secretary of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee  

I was born in 1928 in Chicago, but spent much of my youth in Mississippi with my grandmother. I became involved in the civil rights struggle when I witnessed the mass eviction of black sharecroppers from the south to northern cities like Chicago.  

I spent much of my time raising money and organizing on behalf of the evicted farmers. I became deeply involved with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) when I became its executive secretary in 1961.  

Through my role at SNCC I helped organize the “Freedom Summer” that preceded the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party’s trip to the Atlantic City Democratic National Convention.  

We worked to create Freedom Schools and black community centers as well as working to register black voters. While creating Freedom School we were able to recruit college students to serve as teachers. Other students did a lot to canvass for Freedom Registrations and help organize the new MFDP.  

I travelled here with the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party to the 1964 Convention to speak. I plan to state: “We...demand...Section Two of the Fourteenth Amendment should be enforced, specifically in Mississippi and other Southern States, until voter registration practices are changed.”  

Interview Questions  

1) Find another person involved in the fight for voting rights. Compare your life experience to the experiences they’ve had as part of the Civil Rights movement.  

Ask them what part of Mississippi or the USA they are from.  

How was their experience different from yours? How was it the same?  

What struggles did you both face?  

2) Ask any two people at the convention about their thoughts on the three possible options for the Credentials Committee regarding the MFDP. Which one do they support and why? Do you agree with them?
Aaron Henry
President, Mississippi NAACP
Gubernatorial candidate, Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party

I was born and raised in Mississippi, the son of sharecroppers. “As far back as I can remember, I detested everything about growing cotton.” Fortunately for me, my family made my education a priority.

I graduated high school and then served in the military where I experienced their segregated practices. Upon leaving the military I graduated college on the GI Bill and became a pharmacist.

After school I moved back home to Mississippi where I opened a pharmacy with K.W. Walker. “Our drugstore was to become the gathering place and the hub for political and civil rights planning for three decades.” A lot of people called me “Doc.”

I furthered my involvement with the civil rights movement through work with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference board.

I organized a local branch of the NAACP and was elected leader of the Mississippi branch in 1959. I am proud to say that I am considered a leader in the black community of Mississippi. I was honored to be elected governor of Mississippi during the “Freedom Vote.”

We prepared 68 MFDP members to travel all the way to the Democratic Convention in Atlantic City. Here at the Convention I am working very hard. First, I attended the Credentials Committee hearing to show them the documentation of all of the black Mississippians we had registered to vote. For example, we showed that we could not participate in the Democratic Party in Mississippi, despite the recent constitutional amendment outlawing such practices. We are working long hours trying to reach an agreement with the national Democratic Party, but don’t want any “back-of-the-bus” treatment.

Interview Questions
1) Find another person involved in the fight for voting rights. Compare your life experience to the experiences they’ve had as part of the Civil Rights movement.

Ask them what part of Mississippi or the USA they are from.

How was their experience different from yours? How was it the same?

What struggles did you both face?

2) Ask any two people at the convention about their thoughts on the three possible options for the Credentials Committee regarding the MFDP. Which one do they support and why? Do you agree with them?
Mississippi Sovereignty Commission
Member

It didn’t make any sense, especially since life was fine and had been fine for years.

For as long as I can remember in Mississippi whites and Negroes stayed to themselves. The schools, court houses, movie houses, and of course the churches were segregated. The system worked until some outsiders started convincing Negroes in Mississippi that they had a right to vote. When the Brown v. Board of Education ruling was handed down, the Mississippi state house decided to defend our state and the Governor formed the Sovereignty Commission. Our mission was to preserve a segregated society and to oppose school integration.

In secret, we harass and spy on activists, exposing many of them racial agitators and communist infiltrators. (Even if we are not sure, it is likely they are.) As citizens of the United States, we too had something to say about the Freedom Summer. This summer those folks started those registration drives, Negroes seemed to get all upset and even started to register for the vote. Before the Negro voter registration, political decisions and such were left to the white leaders of our community.

So it was up to people like me, a prominent lawyer in town, to band together with judges, deputy governors and the like to form the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission. We figured that giving Negroes a political foothold might ruin everything hardworking white folks had spent their whole lives trying to build.

The MFDP is trying to destroy our way of life.

Interview Question

1) Ask any two people at the convention about their thoughts on the three possible options for the Credentials Committee regarding the MFDP. Which one do they support and why? Do you agree with them?
Bayard Rustin
National Civil Rights Leader

I was born and raised in Pennsylvania by Quaker parents who were involved in civil rights work. During my life I have faced discrimination not only for being a black man, but also because of my socialist beliefs and homosexuality.

I moved to Harlem when I was in my twenties and made my living as a nightclub singer while continuing with the civil rights work my parents instilled in me as a child.

I am strong believer in the nonviolent teachings of Mahatma Gandhi. I mentored Dr. Martin Luther King on how to use nonviolence in the civil rights movement, specifically during the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

Early on, I recognized the leadership potential in Dr. King and helped him help found the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to strengthen his leadership.

I also was instrumental in organizing the 1963 “March on Washington” where Dr. King moved the nation with his powerful oration. My skills as a strategic organizer have made me a valuable addition to organizations working to advance the cause of civil rights.

At the convention I am doing my best to compromise with Humphrey and the Democratic Party. I have been working hard to set up meetings with the Johnson administration so that the MFDP can work within the institution of the Democratic Party to achieve its aims.

If anyone asks me, I’ll let them know that a key Democrat needed to get the votes for Edith Green’s proposal is Harold Hughes.

Interview Questions

1) Find another person involved in the fight for voting rights. Compare your life experience to the experiences they’ve had as part of the Civil Rights movement.

Ask them what part of Mississippi or the USA they are from.

How was their experience different from yours? How was it the same?

What struggles did you both face?

2) Ask any two people at the convention about their thoughts on the three possible options for the Credentials Committee regarding the MFDP. Which one do they support and why? Do you agree with them?
William Simmons
Spokesperson for the Citizens’ Council

I cannot rightly say that I was at the Democratic National Convention; I wasn’t. However that does not change the fact that down here in Mississippi, I saw what was happening. The Negroes were opening so-called Freedom Schools, where they thought they were educating the students in history and other academic subjects. That was not the worst of it. Volunteers from the north (most of them white) came down to those schools to help out.

Just being in one of those schools could cause trouble for students and parents. Both Negros and whites kept coming, kept teaching and changing things.

Those outsiders, especially the whites, fanned out across the state, made a great to-do of breaking up our customs, of flaunting social practices that had been respected by people here the over years…The arrogance they showed in wanting to reform the whole state…created resentment.

Like I said, I didn’t make it to that convention, but I voted for the folks I wanted to represent me and none of them included anyone from the MFDP, especially that white Reverend Ed King.

Interview Questions

1) Find the reporter from the Clarion Ledger. Ask them what they are doing to uphold segregation and prevent black Mississippians from voting.

2) Ask any two people at the convention about their thoughts on the three possible options for the Credentials Committee regarding the MFDP. Which one do they support and why? Do you agree with them?
Reverend Edwin King  
Chaplain, Tougaloo College  
Lieutenant Governor candidate, Freedom Vote 1963  
National Committeeman, Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party

While I never suffered the indignities of many of the black people in Mississippi, I was clearly not welcome by many of the white people. My face is severely scarred and my jaw was shattered from a suspicious car “accident” last year. From the everyday white working man to Mississippi Governor Paul Johnson, they made no secret that they thought I was a race traitor.

I was hesitant to accept the nomination of lieutenant governor in the Freedom Vote when it was offered to me. I was concerned for the health and safety of myself and my family but mostly I realized “a small thing which suddenly seemed very large. I realized I really did care what people thought about me—and that included the opinion of my old white friends and of other white ministers in the state.” In the end I decided to accept a place on the ticket.

While campaigning I (along with fellow organizers) faced violence yet again. While riding in the “votemobile” trying to register voters fellow activists and I were chased down and stuck under a bridge facing a gang of white goons. Luckily, the quick driving of activist George Green got us out of the situation, but not before a few bullets hit the rear bumper. A white volunteer, down from Yale for the summer, asked “Do you think those fellows really intended to kill us? Those bullets really hit the car sorta low.” I replied, “In Mississippi it is an error to confuse good intentions with poor aim.”

Being a part of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party was both spiritually rewarding and frustrating. I am here at the Atlantic City Democratic National Convention as a delegate and elected official of the MFDP.

Interview Questions

1) Find Lawrence Guyot and ask why he joined the MFDP.

2) Find another person involved in the fight for voting rights. Compare your life experience to the experiences they’ve had as part of the Civil Rights movement.

Ask them what part of Mississippi or the USA they are from.

How was their experience different from yours? How was it the same?

What struggles did you both face?
Hartman Turnbow  
Delegate at the Atlantic City DNC, farmer

I am a fiercely independent farmer and homeowner from Holmes County, Mississippi. I am known for my independent spirit and telling it like I see it. I was one of the first black residents in Holmes County to register to vote. When thirteen others and myself arrived at the courthouse to register, the deputy sheriff asked “Alright whose first?” I stepped right up and said “Me, Hartman Turnbow. I came here to die to vote. I’m the first.” Since that moment I have been a leader in my community. I inspire with by speech and my brave actions. A fellow activist, Susan Lorenzi once described my oration: “His huge energy dominated. He spoke in unusual turns of phrase that we would soon call Turnbowisms... His words flowed rapidly with lilting energy. They tumbled from his mouth, often indecipherable to my inexperienced ears.”

During Freedom Summer, I offered these words to my fellow black Mississippians to persuade them to register to vote: “That lynching I was tellin you about- that one with the burning with the ‘cetylene torch- that ‘n was a turning point. It just...made a Negro mad, got to thinking he’d rather die anyway but to be all burnt up with a torch while he’s still living. But this now, this is something that we is in together. We was all together trying to do something...The Negro ain’t gonna stand fo all that beating and lynching and bombing and stuff. They found out when they tried to stop us from redishing [a Turnbowism for registering] that every time they bombed or shot or beat or cut credit,...it...just made him angry and more determined to keep on...and get redished.” I, myself, have been the target of many acts of violence as a result of my activism.

I am an elected delegate for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. In talking to people as a delegate, I will tell them about my experience registering to vote. My election and being at the Democratic National Convention are acts of empowerment for rural blacks without an education.

Interview Questions

1) Find another person involved in the fight for voting rights. Compare your life experience to the experiences they’ve had as part of the Civil Rights movement.

Ask them what part of Mississippi or the USA they are from.

How was their experience different from yours? How was it the same?

What struggles did you both face?

2) Ask any two people at the convention about their thoughts on the three possible options for the Credentials Committee regarding the MFDP. Which one do they support and why? Do you agree with them?

[Source: Thunder of Freedom]
E.W. Steptoe
Delegate of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, Farmer

I never leave the house unarmed. I know what these people are capable of doing. I organized the first local NAACP chapter in 1953. Armed whites, led by a deputy sheriff, came and broke up our third meeting. My uncle was so frightened that he ran into the woods and stayed there for a week, living on raw food. When he reappeared, he left the county.

I told John Doar from the Department of Justice that I went to those Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee voter registration classes with [Herbert] Lee and Reese, and I told him that Hurst had publicly threatened to kill all three of us. I also told him that whites were recording the license plate numbers of cars at the meetings. I remember telling him “Every Negro in Amite County wants to register to vote, but they’re just afraid…. If Negroes voted, we wouldn’t have any trouble.” I told him that Representative Hurst was the main one people were afraid of. I have known Herbert [Lee] and Hurst since we were all kids, but now Hurst is acting like all the rest. He murdered Herbert [Lee]; I could be next. That’s why I never leave my house unarmed.

The violence I have faced illustrates the dangers of working to register voters. The Atlantic City Democratic National Convention represents a great opportunity for the movement if our delegates can get representation in the party.

I am here at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City as a delegate for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. At this time I am working closely with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

Interview Questions

1) Find another person involved in the fight for voting rights. Compare your life experience to the experiences they’ve had as part of the Civil Rights movement.

Ask them what part of Mississippi or the USA they are from.

How was their experience different from yours? How was it the same?

What struggles did you both face?

2) Ask any two people at the convention about their thoughts on the three possible options for the Credentials Committee regarding the MFDP. Which one do they support and why? Do you agree with them?
Hollis Watkins
SNCC Voting Rights Activist

I was born in 1941 and grew up near Summit, Mississippi, the youngest of 12 children. My parents were sharecroppers.

I met Medgar Evers at some NAACP youth meetings, but I was not particularly involved politically in high school. In fact, it took me going to California to get inspired by the Movement. It was 1960 and I was out there when I saw the Freedom Riders on TV. Looking at them and what they were doing, I said, ‘This is something I want to be a part of.’ When they announced that they were going through Alabama into Mississippi, that’s when I decided to come home and try to hook up with them.

Bob Moses started me working on voter registration around McComb. He served as a mentor and relied on me as one of his cadre of college students. We would go around passing out flyers and inviting people to come by the office or to a mass meeting, where we would sing and talk and explain in detail how to register. We also formed the Pike County Nonviolent Direct Action Committee.

I was jailed for sitting in at Woolworth’s and following the Burglund High School walkout in McComb. I worked on voter registration in Hattiesburg with Vernon Dahmer, and also in Greenwood and Holmes County.

I am here at the Democratic National Convention of 1964 with the MFDP.

Interview Questions

1) Find another person involved in the fight for voting rights. Compare your life experience to the experiences they’ve had as part of the Civil Rights movement.

Ask them what part of Mississippi or the USA they are from.

How was their experience different from yours? How was it the same?

What struggles did you both face?

2) Ask any two people at the convention about their thoughts on the three possible options for the Credentials Committee regarding the MFDP. Which one do they support and why? Do you agree with them?
John Scali
Reporter ABC News

I’ve been covering this Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party for a while now. During the summer I was assigned to report on a volunteer with the MFDP whose husband went missing down in Mississippi. The story had a great angle; good lookin’ white girl goes to help out with voter registration and her husband disappears. Her beautiful grieving face would have played real well on camera. Trouble was, she wouldn’t cry for us! Girl kept talking about the violence used to suppress the vote and asking why her husband hasn’t been found yet.

Anyway, it’s important to have an angle. There’s a lot of violence with these militant civil rights groups and the more horror and savagery the better news you get. Here at the Democratic National Convention it’s mostly just coverage of speeches from the members of the MFDP making their case.

[Sneak preview: Later in the convention, we will switch over from coverage of the testimony of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party delegates when President Lyndon B. Johnson calls a press conference. However, we got a sense that the press conference was a distraction and we re-aired the MFDP testimony that night.]

Interview Questions

1) Find President Lyndon B. Johnson. Ask him if he wants the MFDP to be seated as delegates. Why or Why not?

2) Find the official delegation from Mississippi. Ask them if they support LBJ’s presidential run. Why or Why not?

3) Ask any two people at the convention about their thoughts on the three possible options for the Credentials Committee regarding the MFDP. Which one do they support and why? Do you agree with them?
Dr. Ollye Brown Shirley
Editor for the Vicksburg Citizens’ Appeal

The hard work of civil rights activists never gets fair treatment in the papers. Their actions are either sensationalized or minimized and the news coverage does not reflect the voice of the black Americans for whom activists (like those in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee or Mississippi Freedom Democratic party) are working so hard.

The paper I am writing for was established by myself and Dilla E. Irwin in Mississippi to give impartial coverage of the civil rights struggle and coverage of the black community here. Writing for a paper staffed by women has led to more humanistic coverage of the social, political and economic issues especially as it related to black family, black children and black women. I am proud to write for a paper that takes the advancement of both racial and gender equality seriously. (I am also a parent and a public school teacher.)

I am following the events of the Atlantic City Democratic National Convention closely so that I can write up a story for the Citizens’ Appeal. It is important for me to report the speeches from the MFDP members so that those living in rural Mississippi will be informed of the important goings on here in Atlantic City.

Interview Questions

1) Find at least two female members of the MFDP. Ask them about their experiences as women organizing for voting rights in Mississippi.

2) Find at least two members of the MFDP from rural Mississippi. Ask them about the violence they experienced as a result of their civil rights work.

[Source: USM Oral History]
Malcolm Poindexter
The Philadelphia (Pennsylvania) Tribune

I work for *The Philadelphia Tribune* which was founded in 1884. It is the oldest African-American newspaper serving the Philadelphia, Penn. community. The Tribune was founded by Christopher James Perry Sr. who said: “For my people to make progress, they must have a newspaper through which they can speak against injustice.”

To this day the *Tribune* is dedicated to publishing the stories of the African-American community, making sure their voices are heard. Pivotal to that mission is coverage of the Atlantic City Democratic Convention. Even as the major news networks changed coverage to the President’s press conference I remained focused on the testimony of the delegates and supporters of the MFDP.

Interview Questions

1) Find a member of the MFDP and ask them to share a story about the violence, danger and hardship involved in registering black people to vote in Mississippi.

2) Ask any two people at the convention about their thoughts on the three possible options for the Credentials Committee regarding the MFDP. Which one do they support and why? Do you agree with them?
Unita Blackwell
Member of the Executive Committee of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party

I was born in Lula, Miss. in 1933 and given the name U.Z. In sixth grade, I was told I needed a proper name, which was when I was given the name Unita Zelma. When I was three years old my father fled Mississippi for Memphis, fearing for his life after questioning his boss.

My parents separated when I was five and I moved with my mother to West Helena, Ark. We moved to Arkansas because there were no educational opportunities in Mississippi for me. Before I started school and while on summer breaks, I would work in the cotton fields with my family. I graduated from 8th grade at the age of 14 and continued to work in the cotton fields.

I married Jeremiah Blackwell in my late twenties and we had our only son, Jeremiah Blackwell Jr., or Jerry, in 1957. It was in 1964 while teaching Sunday school in Mayersville, Miss. that I first learned of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Victoria Gray became my role model. Not too long afterward, myself and a few other folks went to the courthouse to take the voter registration test to vote. They intimidated us and kept us waiting all day, and in the end, only two of us got to take the test. The next day, Jeremiah and I were fired from our jobs after our boss found out that we tried to register to vote. Luckily for us, SNCC was able to provide us with some money to help support our family.

Now I am here at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City with Fannie Lou Hamer, Annie Devine, and others to fight for the right to have the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party seated at the Convention.

Interview Questions
1) Find another person involved in the fight for voting rights. Compare your life experience to the experiences they’ve had as part of the Civil Rights Movement.
Ask them what part of Mississippi or the USA they are from.

How was their experience different from yours? How was it the same?

What struggles did you both face?

2) Ask any two people at the convention about their thoughts on the three possible options for the Credentials Committee regarding the MFDP. Which one do they support and why? Do you agree with them?
Walter Mondale
Former Attorney General from Minnesota

I was born in Ceylon, Minnesota on January 25, 1928. My father was a Methodist preacher and my mother was a music teacher.

I grew up admiring Franklin D. Roosevelt. I played football and ran track at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota where I was known as “crazy legs.” Following my father’s death I went to Washington, DC with then Mayor Hubert Humphrey and became secretary for the Students for Democratic Action (SDA). Once I returned home from serving in the U.S. Army, I finished college and earned a law degree from the University of Minnesota.

In 1959, I was appointed attorney general of Minnesota. If Senator Hubert Humphrey becomes Lyndon Johnson’s running mate, I hope to be nominated to fill his senate seat in Minnesota.

Senator Humphrey is in communication with President Johnson about the convention proceedings.

Interview Questions

1) Ask Hubert Humphrey what he has heard from President Johnson.

2) Talk to Credentials Committee members such as Joseph Rauh and Edith Green. Find out what they think about a compromise with the MFDP.