

APPENDIX A
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In 1876 Rutherford B. Hayes, newly elected President of the United States, ordered the withdrawal of Federal troops from the South. That order, for all practical purposes, marked the end of Negro participation in Mississippi government. With the troops gone and Reconstruction in its death throes, the white population of the state united with their brethren across the South to carry out the grand design of "Redemption." Redemption meant the restoration of absolute white rule, and it entailed, first and foremost, the disfranchisement of the Negro freedman. Before the blacks could be dealt with - returned to their place - they had to be stripped of the power given them by the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments; they had to be driven away from the ballot box.

Mississippi and the white South accomplished this goal in less than twenty years. The method was simple terror: beatings, lynchings, arson, torture. It worked. Paralyzed by fear of the nightriding Klans, the Negro voter in Mississippi soon became all but extinct. The pattern was repeated in all the states of the late Confederacy, and in 1901 the last Southern Negro Congressman left the House of Representatives. If Mississippi's scourging of the black electorate seemed more brutal than that of the other ex-rebel states, it could be excused on the grounds that Mississippi had a far greater percentage of Negroes than the rest -- and thus, far more reason to fear. The means, in any case, were not important; the victory had been won. Mississippi was once more the undisputed realm of the American White Man.

The black body politic destroyed, the way was clear to build, under the wing of the state government, a society in which black "arrogance and aspiration" would be impossible. Jim Crow was born, and the Mississippi Negro came slowly to understand that certain "privileges" and facilities were "FOR WHITE ONLY" - among them was the voting booth. The unwritten law of the new order (they called it Segregation) did not long remain unwritten. Lily-white legislatures passed bill after bill, enforcing the new system in every conceivable area of life, buttressing the wall, building higher, filling the chinks. By 1920 the Mississippi Negro had come to understand that everything he did was a privilege, everything he had was a gift - subject to revocation at the whim of the "white folks." The equation for the maintenance of this happy condition was simple: so long as the Negro could mount no power, he represented no threat to the system; so long as he had no vote he had no power. Keep him from voting. Negroes who objected either swallowed their objections, left for Chicago, or died objecting.

And so developed the lunatic non-politics of the Sovereign State of Mississippi. The state has always been too poor for economic issues to form the basis of any meaningful political conflict. The state has always been too preoccupied with the maintenance of its iron grip on the Negro to work toward eradicating its poverty. The status of the Negro has always been the one crucial all-pervading issue: it has always been the one subject absolutely closed to controversy. Concensus on the subject of the Negro has been essential, and required concensus in one area has a way of spreading to other areas. Solidarity became the keynote of Mississippi politics, but behind the wall of solidarity there existed only a vacuum. The prize always

went to the candidate who could shout loudest and loudest the word "Nigger," who was most eloquent in his appeals for the main theme of "Our Way of Life." Bizarre stunts replaced stands on issues as means of gaining support. There was always, of course, the vague antipathy of the hill folk for the rich planters of the Delta, but any political movement could easily be quashed by raising the spectre of Negro power and calling for all-important solidarity.

In 1954, with segregation at last under attack, white Mississippians began to organize and institutionalize the state's isolation; the White Citizens Councils were formed in Indianola. Under pressure from the Freedom Movement the Councils were to grow into a semi-official Committee of Public Safety, exercising something that looked very much like political rule over most of the state. Spreading from the Delta, the Councils organized all over Mississippi, loudly voiced their unswerving devotion to the principles of White Supremacy and State Sovereignty, and girded for the coming attack on Mississippi's Way of Life.

Although the 1960 Freedom Rides were shocking and spectacular, they did not constitute a real threat to the Mississippi status quo. The lack of lasting results of the Freedom Rides was graphic proof that assaults on segregation per se would not work in Mississippi as they had in the upper and seaboard southern states. All of Mississippi was hard-core. The power structure of the state, as embodied in the state government, was absolutely resistant to the idea of any change in race relations. The government itself could spearhead the heavy-handed attack on "freedom riders", secure in the knowledge that the more vigorous and brutal the attack, the better the chances for re-election. There existed no political base for negotiation, no sound reason for moderation. It was clear that the Freedom Movement would make no positive headway in Mississippi until the racial composition of the electorate was radically changed.

Voter registration, therefore, was chosen as the prime focus of movement activities in the state. In comparison to the massive demonstrations taking place in the rest of the South, the program sounded mild. Voter registration volunteers would be working under the legal umbrella of hundred-year-old Constitutional amendments with the outspoken approval of the President - there was certainly no national controversy over whether the Negroes had the right to vote.

There was no controversy in Mississippi either: the white population was unanimous in the belief that voting was a privilege, one for which the Negro was obviously unfit. Robert Moses' voter registration drive in McComb, Mississippi, met with mob violence and registrars who stood fast for disfranchisement and White Womanhood. The balance of power in the registration books of Fike County did not change. In early 1962 voter registration workers moved north into the cotton counties of the Delta, and Greenwood became the focus of voter registration activity. Here again the spectacle of queues of would-be Negro registrants provoked the white community into vigilante action - this time with the added touch of Council organized economic freeze-outs.

With the Freedom Movement work force steadily growing - the new recruits being for the most part native Mississippians, the voter registration workers settled down to the long dull grind of spreading the gospel. Canvassing and persuasion took up most of their time; a good

deal of it was spent in dilapidated county jails. There was always the risk of an occasional beating; lynch mobs and shootings were infrequent but never unlikely. It became apparent that this was going to take some time.

In mid-1963 Negro registration stood at roughly three percent of all registered voters in the state; fewer than six percent of all eligible Negroes were registered. It was decided that no dramatic progress would be forthcoming in the actual registration of Mississippi Negroes until the Federal Government saw fit to enforce the Constitution in the Sovereign State. Attempts at registration, however, were to continue. The pressure on Mississippi from within Mississippi - and with it pressure on Washington - would increase. Programs for the political education of the Mississippi Negro would be developed. Along with their regular voter registration activities field workers would be expected to organize communities and to teach them the rudiments of Democracy. The Freedom Vote Campaign for Governor in the autumn of 1963 (in which large numbers of white volunteers participated for the first time - under COFO auspices) proved the basic soundness of this approach. Negroes in the state were eager for political activity; they wanted to register, they wanted to vote.

The U.S. Department of Justice in the meanwhile had not been completely inactive. The Civil Rights Act of 1960 had empowered the Department to institute suits against entire states as well as against individual registrars in cases where a "pattern or practice" of voter discrimination was found. Suits were brought against the registrars of Forrest and Madison counties, enjoining them from further interference with Negro applications. When Department investigators discovered "pattern and practice" in some sixty-odd of Mississippi's eighty-two counties, a suit was brought against the state itself, challenging the validity of the "constitutional interpretation" segment of the application form. An extremely important Circuit Court decision in the spring of 1964 ordered the registrar of Panola County to dispense with both the constitutional interpretation test and the "duties of a citizen" section of the form. At about the same time a constitutional amendment outlawed the stipulation of payment of poll tax as a requirement for voting in Federal elections.

By May of 1964 the focus of the Freedom Movement political workers had largely shifted to political education programs and state-wide community organization. The Freedom Registration campaign was conceived; the Freedom Candidates ran for national office in the Democratic Primary on June 2. And the newly formed Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party announced its plan to unseat the "regular" Mississippi delegation to the National Democratic Convention. The new party is composed entirely of native Mississippians. Organizational efforts throughout the summer are being focussed on the Atlantic City Convention in August.

This is roughly where we stand in the summer of 1964. The State Legislature was in a panic throughout the spring; it has just passed what is probably the biggest batch of clearly unconstitutional laws in the history of this country. The Citizens Council is stronger than it has ever been. The Ku Klux Klan has revived in the southwestern part of the state, and burning crosses have been spotted all over the state. The Hederman papers have managed, in a few short months , to foster a