

Interview with **Victoria Gray Adams**

November 9, 1985

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**Note:** These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in ***bold italics*** was used in the final version of *Eyes on the Prize*.

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[camera roll 343]

[sound roll 1320]

INTERVIEWER: THE NATURE OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT IN OTHER PLACES AND THE DIFFERENCE SOUTHERN, MISSISSIPPI WAS A POLITICAL BRIDGE—VOTING AND POLITICAL—

Adams: Mississippi was a police state pure and simple.

INTERVIEWER: OK, SO LET'S START—

Adams: Totally isolated from everything.

00:00:24:00

INTERVIEWER: LET'S START AGAIN. LET'S START AGAIN, OK. WHY WAS—WHAT WAS DIFFERENT ABOUT MISSISSIPPI IN TERMS OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT AND THE MOVEMENT HERE IN MISSISSIPPI?

Adams: Well, the difference I, I in Mississippi and, and, and the rest of the, south if you will; or the perceived difference, however you would, is that the, the, it was a police state for all practical purposes. It was truly a closed society, the law enforcement agencies, the government for all practical purposes was simply not accountable to anyone other than themselves, you know. And, for example, in my hometown, OK, I, I tried, I applied for

registration, six times before I was ever able to be accepted, and I was only able to be accepted after we had taken our, our registrar to, to court and in fact all, all of my applications were used, you know, by the justice department in trying to have the registrar establish why, you know, I hadn't been registered in the beginning if you will. And the reason for all this of course was in the state of Mississippi the registrar was all powerful really. And the way the, the laws, the election laws were, anybody could be registered or not registered at the whim of, of the registrar. The requirements, to become a registered voter were you know just unbelievable. But the requirements to become a, a registrar was just simply to be elected. You know.

00:02:14:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT WERE SOME OF THOSE REQUIREMENTS TO BE REGISTERED?

Adams: To become a registered voter? Well you had to read and write—

INTERVIEWER: LET'S START AGAIN. PLEASE, START AGAIN.

Adams: You had to be able to interpret any section of the constitution of Mississippi that the registrar chose to give you to his satisfaction.

INTERVIEWER: CAN I, I'M, I'M GOING TO INTERRUPT ONE SECOND. CAN I HAVE FIVE SECONDS? [cut/wild audio] IT'S KIND OF TOUGH, BUT THEY WILL NOT HEAR MY QUESTIONS.

Adams: Uh-huh.

INTERVIEWER: OK, SO WHEN I ASK YOU SOMETHING, WHAT, WHAT WAS, WHAT WERE THE DIFFICULTIES IN REGISTERING, IT WOULD BE GOOD TO INCLUDE MY QUESTION IN YOUR ANSWER. TO, TO REGISTER, SOME OF THE DIFFICULTIES WE ENCOUNTERED. OK?

Adams: OK. OK.

[sync tone]

00:02:54:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, SPECIFICALLY, WHAT WERE SOME OF THE DIFFICULTIES IN REGISTERING?

Adams: Well, the difficulties were, to register in Miss-in Mississippi the, the, you were at the mercy of the registrar. The requirements to, to be registered were you had to be able to read and write, you had to be able to interpret any section of the constitution that the registrar required to his satisfaction. The requirements to be a registrar was simply to be elected by the

people. There was nothing said you had to be able to read or write, you know, nothing like that to be a registrar, but all that to become a registered voter. And so a, PhD could, could, be denied the right to become a registered voter, by a registrar who, who didn't finish elementary school and so this was the kind of climate that we lived in and you can imagine the mentality of the people many times with whom you had to deal with. And this was certainly true in my town. [coughs] And, so, from the beginning ours was indeed a political fight rather than a struggle if you will, rather than just a purely civil rights struggle. Because our—the climate in our state was such that to go out there and, and wage that struggle just on a purely, you know, civil rights basis, the, the, we could never have gotten off the ground we would probably all have been killed, you know, and I mean intimidated and, and just totally frightened off. Because you see you do have to understand something of the history of voting rights in Mississippi. You know, back, or during reconstruction, we had blacks participating, in every level of government. But, when the 1870 compact was, violated, was, you know betrayed, open season is what happened on not only the blacks but, but, but those other whites and other people in the community who had coalesced and were really about the business of doing progressive kind of things for the people of that state. And, and whole communities of people were, were, was simply slain you know, with immunity, [sic] and when word went out you know from the state to the federal government, asking you know for support, for assistance, for help, none came. And so the whole business was totally destroyed, you know, within a very short span of time. And then Mississippi led the way in 1890 in the 1890s you know, they redid their constitution and that constitution of course, put Jim Crow laws in effect and from that time forward, Mississippi was, a, a very bad place to be just to put it very simply. As long—

00:05:56:00

INTERVIEWER: WE'RE GONNA TAKE A CUE, PLEASE. OK, LET'S CUT PLEASE.

[cut]

00:06:00:00

INTERVIEWER: SO JUST BEGIN TO TELL ME THAT, THAT, HOW YOUR ORGANIZING WOULD CHALLENGE AGAINST IN, IN '64 AND THE IDEA OF FIRST SHOWING THAT YOU WERE BEING EXCLUDED FROM THE REGULAR DEMOCRATIC PROCESS HERE IN MISSISSIPPI.

Adams: OK, well of course, you know, the very next step after be-becoming registered to vote or, is to, is to exercise that right to vote. And, for those few of us who had managed to become registered voters, we naturally wanted to participate, to begin participating at the earliest possible time and, and you know wherever. So, you know, when time came for precinct meetings, and, and, and county meetings and all that sort of thing we were all set to attend, but there was, all kind of games played around that situation. The schedules and the places were always deliberately, you know, misrepresented. You would get there and there was nothing happening there, or in many cases people did actually get there and it was going on but they were not permitted to come in, pure and simple. They just weren't permitted to

come in. And of course, we realized, you know, even with the vote, you you're not gonna get any place if you can't participate in these meetings. And so out of the frustration of not being able to participate at the precinct and county levels, was born the idea of holding our own, elections. And so we had to begin with the registration and we called it the Freedom registration. And so we, we actually mounted an unbelievable campaign of voter registration you know throughout those counties in which we were active we, along with all of the people who had come to support us, went out there and registered hundreds and thousands of people in the Freedom registration. Once that had been, we documented all this of course, and then following the Freedom registration came the Freedom vote. And, we were satisfied ourselves at this point that yes these people we, you know, we are ready to, to vote, we do want to participate, and so out of this exercise grew the idea of the convention challenge. And, a denial—

00:08:23:00

INTERVIEWER: LET ME CUT YOU RIGHT THERE, OK.

Adams: OK.

INTERVIEWER: CAN WE CUT FOR A SECOND?

[cut]

00:08:30:00

INTERVIEWER: OK LET ME, LET ME, WHAT I'D LIKE YOU TO DO IS JUST GIVE ME THE, THE FACT THAT BECAUSE MISSISSIPPI WAS UNIQUE THERE WAS THAT NEED TO HAVE THIS UNITED FRONT IN TERMS OF ORGANIZATIONS. AND, AND THAT OUT OF THAT CAME THE ORGANIZATION OF COFO. OK SO TALK TO ME ABOUT THAT NEED TO DEVELOP IT.

Adams: You know, as I mentioned earlier about the difference in, in, in Mississippi and, and other states, it be—it soon became apparent, that, none of the organizations had resources or had, you know, were gonna be strong enough to do anything, much in Mississippi operating alone. And so, we finally recognized the fact that we needed to combine all the resources that we had in that state in order to be effective. And so out of recognizing this need, COFO was founded as a coalition of all the freedom organizations working within the state at that time.

00:09:35:00

INTERVIEWER: CAN I, CAN I BREAK YOU, NOW. I WANT YOU TO GIVE ME THE SAME THING BUT YOU, WHEN YOU SAY ORGANIZATIONS YOU HAVE TO TELL ME WHAT THE, WHAT YOU MEANT ORGANIZATIONS—

Adams: SNCC—

[cut]

[wild audio]

Adams: —and SCLC, OK...

INTERVIEWER: AND ALSO WHEN YOU SAY COFO, YOU'VE GOT TO TELL ME WHAT COFO IS. BECAUSE COFO DOESN'T MEAN ANYTHING TO ANYONE WHO DOESN'T KNOW THE HISTORY OF SLAVERY. OK?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: THE CHANGE. THE CHANGE.

[cut]

[slate]

[change camera roll to 344]

00:09:53:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: FOUR. THREE-FOUR-FOUR.

Adams: OK, I think so, I'm just trying to remember what we said earlier. [laughs]

00:10:04:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, WHAT I WANT YOU TO DO IS BEGIN TO TELL ME HOW BECAUSE MISSISSIPPI WAS UNIQUE YOU HAD TO DEVELOP THIS UNITED FRONT OF CIVIL RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS.

Adams: Because of the uniqueness of our state in terms of it being just so very hard to, to, to, cope with it soon became apparent that the various organizations working within the state were not going to be very effective working alone. And so it, you know, it, we, we, we realized that what had to be done, we were gonna have to combine the resources of all the groups, at that particular time there was SNCC, SCLC, NAACP, CORE, were, you know were, were the basic groups and so the Council of Federated Organizations was, formed and all of the activities, you know, worked under that umbrella. The basic mold of organiza— operation was that each organization assumed responsibility for that area you know in which or it, it you know it was best prepared to do. And so, once we were it was clear in our minds where we were gonna be going with our, the results of our Freedom registration and, and, and, a vote there was a call you know that went out across the country to the campuses and, and, and all to come and join in this effort. And SNCC of course were experts at recruiting students and, and that sort of thing so they did the bulk of the recruiting and, and, and such. And it was a, it was really a very exciting time. And we were preparing then for the, what we call the long hot summer. And of course if you know anything at all about that it was indeed a long hot summer. The state was also preparing for that long hot summer. Those people

armed themselves to the teeth as though they were expecting an invasion, an armed invasion, if you will and a lot of things happened that summer. But the most exciting thing by far in so far as I'm concerned was the fact that we did through our, education and organization take a delega—a delegation of sixty-eight people to the, Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, and that, I dare say MFDP provided all the excitement for that convention that year.

00:12:48:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, LET ME CUT YOU RIGHT HERE. WANNA CUT?

[cut]

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: GLASS?

00:12:56:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, LET'S GO BACK THEN AND TALK ABOUT—

Adams: OK. As I was saying the, the summer of '64 was really one of a lot of motion, activity of excitement of, of teaching and learning, you know, to organize literally to organize a, a polit—a political party was, quite something. And we held, you know, our organizing convention in the state capitol, and, by, convention time we were all, all ready to go and we went with a lot of optimism because we, we, at this point were still idealistic enough to believe that, you know, the constitutional rights and things were, were all there to be ours as soon as we met the requirements if you will. And so we had documented, in, in all of the ways possible, you know, the fact that black people in particular in Mississippi were being denied the right to participate, were being denied the right to representation. You know, it was the old story of taxation without representation. And so we were indeed off to, Atlantic City for the Democratic National Convention. Delegation of sixty-eight, you know, really looking forward to all of this and we had done our homework and when we got to Atlantic City of course we continued to do that by visiting the various delegations, telling our stories, soliciting their support, all of the things that, you know, and we were, we were novices but it was, it was a tremendous experience. Well—

00:14:43:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, I'M GOING TO CUT YOU RIGHT HERE.

[cut]

[sync tone]

00:14:50:00

INTERVIEWER: OK LET'S TALK ABOUT MOR—, MORALE IN ATLANTIC CITY AGAIN AND WE HAVE A SENSE OF BEING, OF BEING RIGHT.

Adams: *You know, I think one of the things that made the, the, the delegation of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party so hopeful, you know so expectant was the fact that people had made a discovery, you know, a discovery that there is a way out of you know, much of that is wrong with our lives and that is and that there is a way to change it and that is through the execution of this vote, you know. And so we can't get past these people at the state level because they've locked us out, but we, we just know that once we get to the national level you know with all of the proof that we have been locked out and, and the fact that we've had the courage to go ahead and create our own party then there, you know, we feel like we were going to get that representation that we'd been denied for so long* and participation in the process and so that's you know that's the way we arrived in Atlantic City. Really excited about the fact that we were at long last going to be able to participate, to be represented, our needs were gonna you know, be known about and, and spoken to in the political arena. And of course, once there doing, continuing to do, you know the work that was necessary, it was a, it was a rather chilling feeling to become aware of the fact that there was not a tremendous difference between the Democratic Party in Mississippi and the Democratic Party in Atlantic City or the national body, because, they had found a way around responding to our challenge. Instead of acknowledging the challenge as we, you know, brought it to them they, went to look for a compromise, you know, a way out of this, a way that they could, make us think that they were responding to our needs when in fact they were, were not doing any such thing. I tell you what I'm proudest of, of that Atlantic City experience and that is the fact at that delegation because of—or relevant education as well as, as its organization was able to see that whole business for exactly what it was and to say an unequivocal 'no.' And to stand up under the pressure of our own attorney, you know, Joseph Rauh, to stand up under the pressure of many others—

00:17:36:00

INTERVIEWER: LET US STOP.

[cut]

[sync tone]

00:17:43:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: BLACKSIDE.

INTERVIEWER: OK, ONE SECOND. OK, YOU WERE TELLING ME THAT THERE WAS ONE THING THAT YOU, YOU WERE VERY PROUD OF THAT HAPPENED AT THAT, THAT '64, IN '64.

Adams: OK.

00:17:49:00

INTERVIEWER: IN '64.

Adams: OK. You know the one thing that that I was just really proud of in that, con— convention challenge in '64 was the fact that the, the delegation of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party was able to, to recognize, you know, the fact that, that the, convention was not dealing with, with, with our challenge. That they were, you know, trying to hand us a, a, what was supposed to be a compromise that was absolutely totally meaningless and then to have the courage to say no to that even though our, our legal advisor you know was pushing us to accept it. You know, this is, this is a tremendous concession and, but we knew there was no concession at all that when we left Atlantic City we would leave there, you know, with exactly what we had come with, that was no representation, no participation, in the regular Democratic Party. And that is what we were about you see, because our contention was, that, you know, this cannot be the, the party because they don't represent all of the people and here we are with a delegation that is representative anyone can see that we are representative, you know, there's black, there's white, there's, you know, whoever the spectrum. But they said no, this is what we'll give you and we said no, we won't have it we will not accept it.

00:19:22:00

INTERVIEWER: NOW THE OTHER DEMOCRATIC, THE REGULAR DEMOCRATIC PAR—PARTY FROM MISSISSIPPI, DIDN'T THEY REPRESENT PORTIONS OF MISSISSIPPI, WEREN'T THEY ENTITLED TO SOME RECOGNITION AT THAT CONVENTION TOO?

Adams: We were not denying their right to representation, we, we, were, we wanted all of the people to be represented.

00:19:43:00

INTERVIEWER: SAY THEY. START AGAIN. TELL ME WHO, 'THEY.'

Adams: The, the, the regular—

INTERVIEWER: SORRY. WE WERE NOT—

Adams: Mississippi Democratic Party was not representative of all of the people in Mississippi. If you will recall the reason for the challenge in the first place because we were denied participation.

INTERVIEWER: OK LET'S CUT FOR A SECOND. OK.

[cut]



[sync tone]

00:20:02:00

INTERVIEWER: OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SCOOT BACK A LITTLE.

00:20:03:00

INTERVIEWER: OK WERE YOU, DID THE, THE REGULAR DEMOCRATIC, REGULAR DELEGATION HAVE, WERE THEY REPRESENTING THE PARTY, AND I MEAN, MISSISSIPPI?

Adams: You know there were those who, who felt that, and, and probably even said so, you know, well what about the regular, delegation don't they represent certain, portions of the state. Sure they represented certain portions of the states that was the problem in the first place. They only represented certain portions of the population and those portions of the population that were not represented, many of them we know were not represented because they were denied the opportunity to participate and be represented and so the difference between that delegation, the regular Democratic delegation, and the MFDP the Mississippi Freedom, you know, Delegation was that all of our conventions, all of the you know steps in the—

[cut]

[wild audio]

Adams: —electoral process were open to the total or citizenry, and so indeed...

00:21:05:00

INTERVIEWER: WE JUST RAN OUT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: IT'S GOOD THOUGH.

INTERVIEWER: YEAH, YOU'RE RIGHT...

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 345]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: FLAGS. MARKER. WAIT A SECOND.

00:21:13:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, PICK IT UP TALKING ABOUT THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE MISSISSIPPI FREEDOM DEMOCRATIC PARTY AND WHY WERE YOU DIFFERENT?

Adams: The thing that was you know, that we wanted to be very clear was that the difference between the regular Democratic Party delegation and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party delegation was that the, the election process within the MFDP was open at every level to the total populace. Whereas in the regular Democratic Party, this was not the case and so the delegation from the regular party was almost totally unrepresentative, un—you know, unrepresentative of the populace of Mississippi at that time you know. Did this again. But anyway, that was it and that is why the MFDP came into existence in the first place. Because we were denied you know entrance into the regular party. And—

00:22:14:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, OK CUT.

[cut]

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARKER.

00:22:22:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, SPEAK TO ME ABOUT MRS. HAMER. WHAT DID SHE REPRESENT TO, MISSISSIPPI AS A MODEL, AS A MODEL OF LEADERSHIP AND, ACTIVISM? TALK TO ME ABOUT HER.

Adams: I guess, the, the beauty of, Mrs. Hamer was, well it was the beauty and at the same time it was the tragedy you know of, of what the, of what the society deprives itself of, with its double standards. I remember during the Democratic Convention we were coming from some place and somebody said “you know it’s just, it’s, it’s just such a shame that those people threw Mrs. Hamer out of her home just because she tried to register to vote.” And I said “those people did Mrs. Hamer a favor that was the best thing that ever happened to her when they threw her out of her home.” Because look what we would never have known if they hadn’t thrown her out but because she was thrown out of her home the real, the real Fannie Lou came through and she as you all know was one of the most dynamic leaders in, the Mississippi movement and you know it was, it was just a delight, it was an inspiration it was all of this to see this lady grow and unfold and become the tremendous human being that she was. If she hadn’t gotten thrown off that plantation she would never have known that and neither would we. I mean we would have been deprived of all that and she inspired so many,

many, many people. You know her life has just been exactly what she said a light and just think of the many Fannie Lous that were born, lived and died and never knew.

00:24:15:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, MY, LAST QUESTION IS, WHAT DID, WHAT DID THE MFDP LEARN FROM THE '64 CHALLENGE?

Adams: The MFDP learned and I hope the, you know, far more than just the MFDP, was that if people are given relevant education, as to what their rights are, if they are given relevant education, as to what an issue is all about, and then you know organize around that particular issue whatever it happens to be, voting rights or whatever, then you know your, your potential for whatever it is you need to, to get is absolutely unlimited. You can do anything you need to do if you know why you need to do it and you know how to do it, you have the strength to do it. And that's what it's all about is relevant education and effective organization. Anybody anywhere around any issue can do that and can accomplish whatever it is they need to accomplish. At least that's what I think.

00:25:35:00

INTERVIEWER: OK. CUT.

[cut]

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: AT FLAG.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: MARKER.

00:25:42:00

INTERVIEWER: SO TELL ME WHAT DID IT MEAN TO ACCEPT THAT COMPROMISE, WHEN YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT PEOPLE WHO WERE PUTTING THEIR LIVES ON THE LINE?

Adams: You know for those who are unable to understand, why we were unable to accept that compromise—they, what they didn't realize was we would have been betraying those very many people back there in Mississippi, whom we represented, who not only had laid their lives on the line but many who had, who had given their lives in order for this particular event to happen. And, you know, as they said to us you know just take this, this time and then next time, you know, I thought about the many people for which there was not gonna be a next time and, and I think so did the majority of the delegation. Because, you know, we realized that we came with nothing and it made no sense at all with all the risk that had been taken that were being taken to accept what we knew for certain to be nothing and to go back there to God only knows what and I doubt if there was a person in that delegation that did not

realize that. You may get home and not have a house, you may get home and a member of your family might be missing, or you may not get home at all. And so, you know, we are not going to accept anything less than what we came after, which is the real thing. Which is representation, which is the right to participate and if we don't get that then we'll go back and take our chances and regroup and come to fight another day and that is precisely what we did.

INTERVIEWER: OK. THANK YOU.

[cut]

00:27:29:00

[end of interview]

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